



# Environmental Literacy in New Jersey: A Call to Action



## Section 3 Environmental Literacy and Environmental Education

Information about problems and issues related to environmental quality, natural resources and human health are featured daily in the news and range from local concerns to global phenomena. The Internet, television, radio and print media feature information about such topics as wetlands, indoor and outdoor air quality, climate change and energy use, water supply and flooding, smart growth, soil contamination and endangered species, to name but a few. Decisions regarding farmland preservation, open space and land use/zoning and development are part of public ballots and local decision making processes. Organizations, businesses, government agencies, institutions and citizens are promoting and adopting green building and sustainable practices as ways to address such challenges. Social networking circles feature electronic conversations about green activities, exploring nature, and outdoor pursuits.

There is increasing urgency for today's adults and youth to be aware of and to understand society's complex environmental and ecological challenges and how to address them. Just as importantly, people must understand how the problem or issue involves them directly because of their practices or behaviors, as well as how the problem or issue may affect their own health and quality of life. However, sometimes the environmental and scientific information people acquire throughout their lives is fragmented and seldom enough to comprehensively cultivate the depth of understanding and variety of collective experiences and skills needed to inform, engage and motivate people to take appropriate actions or alter their daily practices.

The field of environmental education provides the foundation for in-depth, lifelong learning about the environment. Environmental education provides people with opportunities for experiencing natural and built systems and the complex relationships that exist between nature and people through the ways people meet their basic needs and live their daily lives.

Environmental education is designed to help people of all ages develop the knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and behaviors needed to maintain, protect and improve the environment through routine activities at home, in the workplace, at school and within the community at large.

Environmental education experiences include classroom, research, laboratory and field studies that focus on the sciences, social studies and geography, natural resource management, environmental quality, sustainability, development and design, environmental health, careers and technology, and "green collar" training. These experiences are typically engaging learning opportunities that are designed for targeted ages and can take place in a variety of formal and informal instructional settings.

In a classroom setting for children, environmental education experiences are known to help increase the performance of students on standardized tests. It engages them in the use of critical and creative thinking and problem solving skills and involves them in inquiry-based learning and investigations. Environmental concepts and themes are used for integrated studies in multiple subjects, such as by linking scientific inquiry with learning goals in mathematics, language arts, social studies, health and the fine arts.

Studies have suggested that environmental education and outdoor experiences help decrease student absenteeism and disciplinary actions that typically take place in classroom settings, largely by emphasizing student engagement. Structured outdoor activities and creative play are also recognized methods for combating weight and obesity issues, as well as the increasing amount of time spent by youth using various forms of hand-held technology, computers and television. Environmental education is also used to enhance self awareness and develop leadership and group socialization skills.

Community-based environmental projects, service learning, volunteerism, ecotourism and “citizen science” action programs are known to help increase engagement in community stewardship activities and help empower participants to become active in local decision-making and leadership. Adult environmental education leadership courses offered by organizations, government and educational institutions help nurture more knowledgeable and engaged local leaders, and community-based sustainability models help unify local interests in long-term community planning and design.

Corporations and businesses investing in environmental technologies, sustainable industrial practices, green building and green behaviors often educate employees and clients, as well as local communities, about their environmental investments and changing workforce needs. Such commitments demonstrate positive models to be replicated while showcasing the environmental and economic benefits of sustainable practices in the workplace. Colleges, universities and career prep programs are also investing in green buildings, cleaner technologies and services and other green campus practices, and are incorporating new green collar training programs into course offerings and campus activities.

Informal environmental education experiences offered to families, youth, adults, groups and classes by museums and nature centers, zoos and aquariums, parks and conservation organizations facilitate lifelong learning about ecology, human health, environmental protection and sustainability. Nature study and outdoor recreational pursuits, such as canoeing, fishing, hiking, hunting and camping, engage people of all ages in the discovery, enjoyment and understanding of the environment.

All of these types of environmental education activities, supplemented by the ever-present array of media sources on scientific, environmental and green topics, such as television shows, Internet content, periodicals, and celebrity spokespersons, provide citizens with diverse opportunities for learning about the world. These collective experiences and lessons encountered throughout a person’s lifetime help cultivate that individual’s environmental literacy.