

# Reaching out with Respect: Environmental Education with Underserved Communities



*Thinking about environmental education and underserved communities is an opportunity to challenge our assumptions about nature, culture and science, and, our assumptions about the life experiences of people of different backgrounds and cultures*

**by Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer and Shamu Fenyvesi**

*Based on a presentation at the 2003 Environmental Education Association of Oregon annual conference*

## **A Few Stories, A Few Questions**

**I**t was a clear, cold winter day in New England and I had a plan for the afternoon's activities. I was taking the group of urban Africa-American youth in the after school program to snowshoe on the frozen lake near town. We were going to do winter ecology activities about hibernation, insulation and temperature, and look at layers of the snow. However, my plan, carefully constructed and full of ecological content, had left out one crucial piece; the students. They had never worn snow shoes before and had never walked on a frozen lake. They thought I was crazy. That afternoon I spent over an hour coaxing the students out onto the lake, and the rest of the time following their giddy curiosity on the ice and snow.

*What can we do if our students are not comfortable in the outdoors?*

Another afternoon many months later I arrived ready to take the students to the local park for sensory awareness activities. I walked in to the room in the church where we met and immediately could tell something was wrong. Two students were yelling at each other, another was sitting sullen in the corner and the third was getting ready to walk out. It took me a while to get enough focus in the room to hear the story. At the mostly European-American school these African American students attended, Imus, one of the students in our group, had been called a 'nigger' by a white classmate. Imus responded by hitting the student. Imus got suspended. There

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# E.E. with Underserved Communities

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were no consequences for the white student. That day we did a lot of talking and listening. We didn't do any nature awareness activities. Because I and the other staff had developed a good rapport with the students, Imus trusted us with his anger. The fact that we listened to and responded thoughtfully to the students' experience in the school helped us to bridge, at least partially, the racial divide. I think that once I had followed the students into their world they allowed me to take them a little further into my world of nature exploration.

*When does environmental education take a back seat to other concerns of our students, and how do we bridge our students' experiences and our educational goals?*

Every time I sit with a group of young people and tribal elders near water, I am reminded of why I love the work that I do with the Native Waters Project. Group discussions almost always begin with an elder sharing a prayer, often in a native language that instantly connects us with the world around us and each other, even though I cannot understand a word. Shared stories that follow are rich in meaning. Every bird, every tree, every rock, elders say has a story, a spirit, and a song. I like being reminded that we are all connected. At the University, it is easy for me to forget this as we departmentalize geology from hydrology from ecology. In tribal communities, it is just understood as the Lakota say *mitakuye oyasin*, or "we are all related."

*If we believe that we are all related, how does that change the way we teach about rivers, grasslands and forests?*

For us – educators who have worked with a variety of communities — thinking about environmental education and underserved communities has been an opportunity to challenge our assumptions about nature, culture and science, and, our assumptions about the life experiences of people of different backgrounds and cultures. Working with urban African American students and Native American communities has helped us to explore our ideas about what environmental education is and what it could be.

## The Whos, Whats and Whys of EE with Underserved Communities

According to the EPA's 1996 Assessment of Environmental Education and the work of educators in the field, environmental education programs have largely failed to meet the needs of several communities. These underserved communities include: urban communities, low income communities, African Americans, Latinos/Hispanic Americans, and Native American communities. Teachers and scholars in environmental

education point to our shortcomings with these communities as one of the central failures of the field.

A variety of factors have brought about this inequity including: lack of funds for access to materials and transportation, the fact that environmental issues have often been pitted against socioeconomic issues central to these communities, and cultural bias within the environmental community.

But why, in the face of the current political, financial and programmatic challenges, does environmental education need to shift to address these communities?

Firstly there is the fundamental ethical issue of equity; All people should have access to relevant and meaningful educational programs. Considering the demographic changes in U.S., and our evolving understanding of environmental issues as social issues, the importance of informed and active

citizens on every block underscores the need for environmental education to reach these communities. Wouldn't it be great if the field of environmental education reflected the



diversity of our population?

Secondly, these communities have much to teach us about environmental education, science, cultural ways of knowing, and traditional ways of teaching and learning. To believe that our EE programs, largely grounded in Western science, are the only ways to teach and learn, is to miss the richness of all of the other ways of knowing nature. Traditional ways of knowing, held for us by elders in cultural groups throughout the world, are just beginning to be appreciated. To solve our multi-dimensional ecological issues today, we are going to need multi-dimensional solutions and those are at the heart of traditional knowledge and culture.

For instance, in the Missouri River Basin, there are 22 tribes, in the Columbia River Basin there are 54. Every one of



This article is based on a presentation made at the 2003 annual conference of the Environmental Education Association of Oregon. Clearing hopes to be able to publish similar articles from other presenters, enabling Clearing to serve as a "conference proceedings" and sharing the information presented at the conference with many additional educators throughout the region.

these tribes has their own language, their own culture, their own ways of knowing nature. Recent research has illuminated the parallels between cultural and biological diversity. Those areas of the world with the greatest biological diversity also contain the greatest indigenous cultural diversity. Ecologists have long preached that for ecosystems, "Diversity is stability". Can we say the same for cultural diversity; that it enriches and stabilizes human and natural communities?

Educator and artist, Gregory Cajete, offers a key to understanding traditional ways of knowing in his book *Native Science*. He writes, "The difference between Native and non-Native use of the land and its resources is that Native cultures have traditionally aspired to live in accordance with an ideal of reciprocity and with the landscape, guided by cultural values, ethics and spiritual practice....To understand the foundations of Native science one must become open to the roles of sensation, perception, imagination, emotion, symbols, and spirit as well as that of concept, logic, and rational empiricism...." (P.183).

How can these views inform our work as educators?

In their article in the *Journal of Environmental Education*, Lewis and James argue that too many environmental education programs focus on the biological sciences rather than social issues, and emphasize wilderness preservation rather than quality of life issues. For these reasons much environmental education does not meet the needs of poor communities, urban communities and communities of color, for whom neighborhood air quality may be a priority over distant wildlife habitat.

How can environmental educators embrace environmental issues which affect these communities?

## 15 Suggestions For Environmental Education with Underserved Communities

There are many recent examples of effective environmental education programs in urban African American and Latino communities and in Native American communities. From speaking with people in the field, looking at existing programs, and reading the research we have compiled a brief list of lessons and suggestions on working towards more culturally diverse environmental education.

### 1. It's All About Relationships.

Break down barriers through rapport. EE programs need to be planned with the community you want to serve, not for them. Start the process by listening and asking questions about where

people are at: What do they care about? What do they see in their community?

### 2. The Process is More Important Than The Programs.

When developing collaborative programs with underserved communities, the process of collaboration, trust building and teamwork is often as important as the programs themselves.

### 3. Do Your Homework

Understand the value systems and social norms in the community that you serve. For example, when working with water in tribal communities, it is inherently understood that water is animate and has a spirit, and that there is significance to each natural place because each place reflects the whole order of nature.

### 3. Bring Meat.

When creating programs in a community that is not your own, always ask questions, listen and adapt to the social norms. If it is customary for guests to bring meat...bring meat. Dough-



nuts? Bring doughnuts.

### 4. Unsaddle Your Horse.

Trust and relationships have to be established over long periods of time. Spend time getting to know people, beyond scheduled meetings and programs. Make time for community or cultural events.

### 5. Create Chaos Conscientiously.

Consider facilitating a series of planning meetings in your key community, conscientiously seeding ideas, and then let community members decide how to sow these ideas based on their dreams, community needs and values. Always remember, it's not your program.

### 6. Build Bridges

Talking openly about cultural differences may help develop

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## **E.E. with Underserved Communities**

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cross-cultural understanding. Provide cultural bridges between the dominant culture and the culture with which you are working. You can use one blackboard for traditional cultural knowledge and another for Western science and help participants translate between the two.

### **7. Collectively Dream for Children**

Everyone has hopes and dreams for their children. They are our future. The sharing of our dreams for them can offer a chance for everyone involved in program planning process to find common ground.

### **8. Tear Up The Templates**

Every community has a different culture or set of shared agreements from which they live, work, and understand nature. Assumptions, or applying a little "programming experience" from "another similar underserved community," can have unintended consequences. Wherever possible, start from scratch.

### **9. Team Teach Early and Often**

In every community, there are already great educational programs in place. Cooperatively teach with local education leaders, fully participate in their activities, and always demonstrate respect for work that is already going on.

### **10. Can You Get There?**

Think about access issues and comfort level with outdoor activities. What to you may be recreation, is to someone else difficult work, or just plain scary.

### **11. Wilderness or Asthma**

Think of broader content connections for EE that are relevant to those communities such as EE and health, EE and literacy. Be conscious about your assumptions about nature and EE.

### **12. There are Many Trails**

Allow your students different ways of expressing what they know.

### **13. Sit Down and Deliver**

Underserved communities are used to broken promises. By never promising anything that you can't deliver, you can be a respectful agent for positive change.

### **14. Honor Diversity**

Few people are overt racists, but all of us can choose to actively dismantle inequities. Educate yourself and colleagues on race issues, white privilege, and environmental justice issues. Remember that these categories (race, gender, class) are fluid.

### **15. Do Not Abandon Us**

Working with underserved communities is a long-term commitment. Make a conscious choice before the grant ends to continue the partnerships and relationships that you have worked so hard to form.

## **A Few Resources on EE and Underserved Communities**

Adams, M., Bell, L.A. and Griffin, P. (1997). Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook for teachers and trainers. Routledge Press.

Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation. 2003. Case Studies of underrepresented groups. Washington, D.C.

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