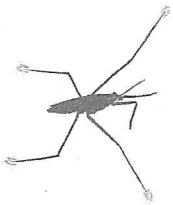
Service Learning

Engaging Students In Environmental Action Projects



The following excerpt has been adapted from Project WILD's *Taking Action: An Educator's Guide to Involving Students in Environmental Action Projects*, published by the Council for Environmental Education in cooperation with World Wildlife Fund. For more information or to order this guide, please contact Project WILD, Council for Environmental Education, 5555 Morningside Drive, Suite 212, Houston, TX 77005, Phone: (713) 520-1936, E-mail ***info@projectwild.org***, or visit the Project WILD website at ***www.projectwild.org***.

What Is an Action Project?

Project WILD has defined environmental action projects as any activities that get students involved in tackling an environmental issue or problem or that aim at improving an environmental setting. Activities are often most successful when they are focused on the local community, such as the enhancement of outdoor habitats or the development of natural sites within a neighborhood or on the school grounds. Projects can also work on a much broader scope—raising money to adopt sea turtles, for example.

An action project can be simple or complex—as straightforward as putting up a community bulletin board of current environmental events, or as involved as developing and implementing a community plan for oil collection and recycling. However complex, most action projects will fit into a variety of educational settings. Many educators find that action education blends well with their regular teaching duties, while others choose to make it the basis for afterschool sessions. Action learning is effective in informal settings, too, involving young people through nature centers, zoos, aquaria, and scouting programs.

Who Can Do Action Projects?

Students of all ages can take part in service learning projects, matching the complexity of the tasks to the abilities of students. Older students can get involved in issues that require research, issue analysis, in-depth discussion, careful planning, and follow-up. Students might establish river monitoring activities or conduct community education initiatives. Younger students can begin with projects that don't involve heated controversy, long-term commitments, or complex solutions. Picking up litter, writing a letter about an environmental concern, or planting a butterfly garden are excellent starting points for younger students.

Some Tips to Keep in Mind

Encourage student ownership and initiative.

The more students are involved in the project, the more they will get out of it. To the extent possible, allow students to make their own decisions on which problem to focus, how to conduct the project, and how to share results. Help students chart their own course, evaluate the pros and cons of each choice, and then gauge how much direction is needed.

Encourage parents and other community members to support the project.

Conflict sometimes can surface when students interact with community members who don't agree with a specific activity or don't feel that action projects are an appropriate educational approach. In many cases, you can diffuse this response by discussing projects with parents and community members beforehand and by explaining how environmental action projects enhance educational goals.

Keep your opinions in perspective.

Allow students to research material, discuss the issues, and form their own perspectives on the issues. Allow everyone the chance to openly express his or her opinions, no matter how different they may be. It is also critical to keep students on track and focused on the facts. Emotionally charged debate and hotly contested points of view can obscure the real facts and divert students' attention from the issue under scrutiny.

Encourage student cooperation, compromise, and understanding.

Have students work in small groups as much as possible. Besides the well-documented educational benefits of cooperative learning, group work offers a taste of real-life problem solving. Teams of scientists, politicians, business people, and concerned citizens often arrive at a plan of action together. Ideally, each person brings his or her own perspectives and talents to the process, and the results reflect the strengths of those human resources. Multiple perspectives encourage thoughtful debate, boost critical thinking skills, and allow students to make informed choices—especially if opinions are accompanied by reliable information.

Help students evaluate their methods and change their plans if necessary.

From time to time over the course of a project, have students assess the overall scheme and evaluate their methods. Ask if they think things are running as smoothly as expected. If they think there's room for improvement, ask what might be done to adjust the situation. In some cases, problem-solving teams can brainstorm ways to deal with the snags and setbacks encountered along the way.

Help students appreciate the value of their work.

It's important for students to know that their project, no matter how small, is significant. Assure students that every action counts. Even if students' actions do not seem to have much effect right away, the long-term results can be very important.

Approaches to Environmental Action

Teach It!—The Educate-and-Inform Approach

Projects that focus on teaching others about environmental issues (These might include older students mentoring younger students, conducting community education programs, writing and performing songs and poems, or conducting workshops with school or community groups.)

Make the Case—The Persuasive Approach

Projects designed to convince people to support a certain course of action or point of view (Activities include creating posters or brochures, creating virtual discussion forums through social media, conducting debates, writing letters to the editor, giving speeches, and distributing public service announcements.)

Be on the Money—The Economic Approach

Strategies that encourage consumers to shop with the environment in mind, as well as projects that raise money to support specific organizations, programs, or individuals working on environmental issues (Activities might include promoting environmentally friendly products, asking for cash or in-kind donations of time and materials from businesses and community groups, or applying for grants.)

Get Physical—The "Ecomanagement" Approach

Projects that physically improve the environment, such as planting trees, landscaping school grounds, cleaning up neighborhood parks or streams, or building bird and bat houses

Make Decisions—The Political Action Approach

Projects focusing on political action that could include speaking at a public hearing, meeting with an elected representative to discuss specific legislation, testifying before lawmakers, circulating petitions and fliers, writing letters to the editor, or campaigning for candidates

Become Legal Eagles—The Courtroom Approach

Projects that attempt to create change through legislation, or that take legal action against an individual, corporation, community, or government agency (Although most projects that involve primary and secondary students will not involve actual legal action, many projects can educate youngsters about existing laws and the workings of the legal system.)

Source: "Approaches" adapted with permission from *Investigating and Evaluating Environmental Issues and Actions* by Harold R. Hungerford et al. (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Co., 10–12 Chester St., 1992)

Seven Steps to Action

Here are some basic steps that will help students get action projects off the ground. While the steps are listed in order, it's important to note that planning and implementing a project is not always a clear-cut, linear process. In some cases, students will investigate an issue, discuss it, begin to work on it, and then change their strategy as they use new information. They might decide to narrow their focus or switch projects after realizing that the potential solutions are beyond their capabilities. Such adjustments are a normal part of the learning process.

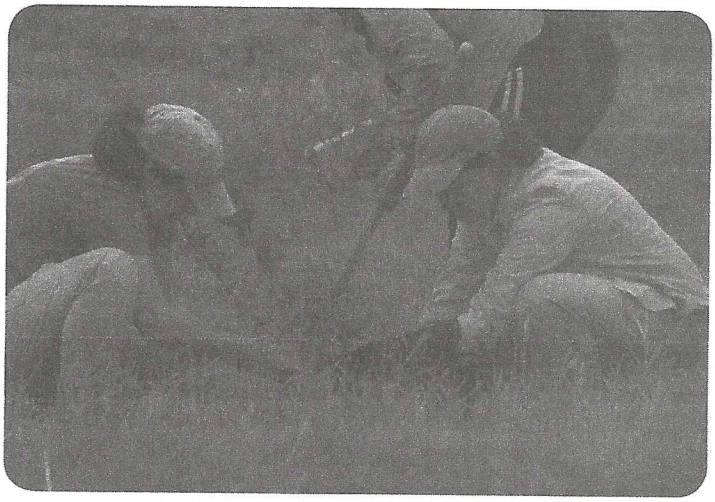
1. Get Informed

Before students decide which environmental projects to pursue, they need to become informed about the possibilities. Students may collect a pool of information from web resources, newspapers, and magazines; interview community members and parents; or contact organizations and government agencies that focus on environmental issues.

Another important step in this initial process, if it can be arranged, is for students to get out and see local environmental problems firsthand. A field trip to a stream in need of cleanup is much more powerful than reading about water pollution. Even if students eventually select a problem that's occurring thousands of miles from their community, the exposure to concerns in their own backyard will be an important learning experience.

2. Create a List of Possibilities

Once the students' search has highlighted a number of potential topics, have them work in groups to develop a list of the most interesting or worthwhile ones. Then have students draft a list of projects to address all or part of each topic.



Environmental topics can be very broad and there are almost always several project possibilities for each topic. For example, water quality in the community might encompass pollution in a local river, lead in the city water system, or leaks in a landfill. Projects might include monitoring the pollution levels in the river over time and presenting data to the city council, conducting an education campaign about lead in the city's drinking supply, or developing a recycling plan to reduce the pressure on a landfill. Have students list the topic they most want to tackle, then they can brainstorm specific projects that might help the situation, listing any additional information they'll need to evaluate each project.

3. Narrow the Choices

Once the groups have selected the issues and projects they are most interested in, they need to evaluate and narrow their choices. For each project listed, the groups need to realistically address what they might accomplish and what problems the project might solve.

Encourage students to discuss the feasibility of each possibility by asking specific questions that help them think about the details of accomplishing certain tasks. Students may want to develop criteria to help them first select a project and then decide how they will determine the most appropriate solution. How much time will the project take? How complex is it? What resources are needed? Whom will they need to talk to?

Sometimes it's difficult for students to decide among local, national, and global projects. Although each will provide learning opportunities, an advantage of a local project is that students will learn more about how their own community works. They'll also be more likely to see real results.

4. Select a Project

By this point, students should have narrowed the list to the top three to five projects. Give them adequate time to research. Then encourage the use of libraries, interviews with experts, surveys, newspaper articles, local TV news, and so on. Invite experts or resource people in to discuss problems, find potential solutions, and help evaluate students' ideas. The more your students know about specific possibilities, the better equipped they'll be to develop a realistic action plan.

As students approach their final decision, have each group present a case for one or more of the projects the group feels strongly about. Then hold a group vote or have a large group discussion to reach consensus. The important thing is to let students have as much say in the decision-making process as possible, choosing a project that they think is both interesting and achievable.

5. Create an Action Plan

Once students have done their research and selected a project, help them get started on their action plan by asking, "What do you hope you'll be able to accomplish by doing this project?" After students share their answers, guide them in developing a goal for the project and specific, concrete objectives that need to be accomplished along the way.

Remind students to keep the goal and objectives in mind as they work to complete a planning sheet that includes the following:

1. What environmental problem or issue will the project address?

2. How would you briefly describe the goal of the project and the strategy to accomplish this goal?

3. What are the specific objectives that will help the group reach its overall goal?

4. What are the approximate starting and ending dates of the project?

5. Did you list the tasks to accomplish to meet each objective? Include a tentative completion date for each task, the names of people responsible, the supplies and equipment needed, any funding needed, and ideas of where to get materials and funding.

6. Did you write down the names of people and organizations that may be able to provide useful information, specific skills, expertise, or other help?

7. Did you list ideas on how to publicize and generate support for the project?

8. Did you describe how your success will be measured?

A large-format task and timeline chart may help the groups keep track of responsibilities and deadlines. As students work on their action plan, guide them toward realistic objectives. One of the most common problems for students is thinking too big. Help them focus and simplify the project by discussing the responses to the questions on their planning sheet and by asking them to really consider hard questions. How will the funds be raised? Can the problem be tackled on a smaller scale?

6. Put the Plan into Action

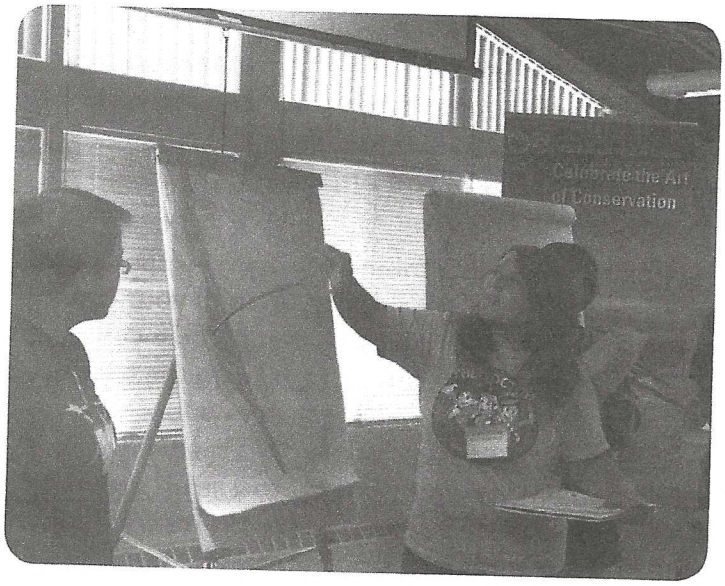
Students' projects will work best if they keep careful records of what they've done, when they did it, whom they've contacted, etc. They will also need to keep track of who is doing what to make sure crucial tasks are being completed and to avoid duplicating efforts. It's important that students take stock of the project periodically to see if they are on target and to

make modifications, if necessary. Remind them that it's acceptable to rethink their goals and objectives and to revise their plan of action in light of new information or unexpected obstacles.

To build support for action projects, publicize any successes and showcase the ways that action learning promotes educational goals and addresses community priorities. There are many ways to let others know what students have done—holding a community awards event, posting successes through social media, getting a reporter from the local newspaper or television station to cover a project, or sending out public service announcements (PSAs). Have students brainstorm ways to publicize their work.

7. Assess, Generalize, Apply, and Celebrate!

Taking time to reflect upon and evaluate an action project helps students understand what they've accomplished and allows them to recognize how their project has facilitated their personal growth. As a project nears completion, guide students in assessing the project itself, as well as their feelings about the experience. Remember to incorporate a celebration of the project's success! It's important for students to evaluate the success of each project and to think about improvements for the next time. It's also important that they look beyond the immediate impact to more long-term, broad-scale gains—skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they can apply to other aspects of their lives.



Ideas for Measuring Success

Assessing Student Knowledge

- Keep a video or photo log of project highlights. After the project is completed, use the video or photo scrapbook as a springboard for discussions in which students share what they learned and their feelings about the experience.
- Collect memorabilia (articles about the project, newspaper photos, students' own photos, planning schedules, and so on) to create an action project scrapbook that students can sign and write comments in.
- Ask students whether they've changed their thinking or behaviors as a result of the project. Have students write essays describing what those changes are and what students think prompted them.
- Have students keep a journal or blog to record feelings about the project, its progress, and its setbacks and to keep notes about working with others. After the project, students share parts of their journals with the group and discuss their perceptions.
- Have students evaluate other members of their group, as well as themselves. Before they do, give students pointers on positive, constructive feedback. Focus the session on specific points, such as contribution to the project, effort, conflict resolution approach, etc.
- Have community members who were involved in the project assess student performances. Educators can develop an assessment form or have students conduct short interviews.

Assessing Project Success

- Have students describe how well they think their project accomplished the objectives they outlined at the start.
- Have students conduct surveys, field studies, or interviews to assess the success of their completed project. What worked? What didn't? Why?
- Evaluate how students planned for ongoing maintenance and sustainability of the project.
- Have community members and others who were involved in the project assess project outcomes.