

Inspiring Environmental Stewardship: Educational opportunities make kids aware of the world around them

Note: This continues our series on environmental education. For part one in the series, go to motifri.com/a-new-generation-of-environmentalists

As I begin to uncover what encourages environmental stewardship in young people, my first thought turns to one question: What's being incorporated into education that inspires a sustainable mindset toward nature? The importance of this became clear to me in summer 2019 on a rural island in Maine, about an hour north of Portland. With a group of 40 educators of all forms and from all over the US and beyond, we spent a week immersed in the natural world at a nature educator's course led by the Audubon Society of Hog Island, meant to provide attendees with techniques to engage both children and adults in nature. I left my week on Hog Island inspired after receiving the tools to take lessons from the natural world and bring them back to our communities.

I brought back with me a curiosity for environmental education and how it's incorporated in PVD. On a cool fall night at Roger Williams Park, the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association (RIEEA) hosted a potluck full of food and conversation on the significance of environmental education and the boundaries that exist when integrating education into the lives of children and adults alike. According to RIEEA, environmental education is the process by which students learn to become environmentally literate, meaning they have an understanding of the environment, what factors can have an effect on it, how humans impact the environment, and how to investigate and take actions on solutions to addressing environmental challenges. This rather broad definition leaves room for interpretation, especially in terms of implementing and integrating it into school curriculum. At the same time, this means that environmental education can be as simple as getting kids outside.

One way this takes shape is through the Schoolyard Habitat Program, a collaboration between the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Rhode Island Audubon Society. The program provides grants to create spaces on school grounds that are beneficial to both wildlife and school culture. "It's important that the project is ecologically sound and provides resource benefits, but can also be accessed and used regularly for the school and teachers," said US Fish and Wildlife Biologist Cindy Corsair, who works as the technical lead for habitat restoration. This can mean planting flora that attract native migratory species and pollinators or creating a vegetation buffer between school land and streams. Since the start of the program in 2016, five schools have created habitats in their schoolyard.

In 2018, Alice M. Waddington Elementary School in East Providence received the Schoolyard Habitat Program Grant. Waddington sits on the Annawamscutt Creek, a feature that's the highlight of the schoolyard habitat. With the help of the grant, Waddington has re-planted portions of the creek with native food plants to increase wildlife appearances, included sensory plants for learning experiences and with the help of the students, posted signage with educational information and a mission statement: *a place to inspire more kids to visit and conserve the creek.*

"We're educating citizens first and foremost," said RIEEA's project manager Jeanine Silversmith. "With

environmental education there's communication skills that are built up and students gather evidence, make decisions, analyze things and more," Silversmith said. Silversmith believes that environmental education is all around just good education. Donna Long, a 5th grade teacher at Waddington Elementary has seen this firsthand, too.

"Sometimes kids will bring their parents here on the weekend to make sure it's not dammed up. Or they come and they look for frogs," said Long who utilizes the habitat with her students every week, weather permitting. With boots, nets and shovels in tow, Long and her 5th graders catch little fish, gauge temperature and depth, and collect water and soil samples to further analyze in class. Long encourages her students to consider the landscape and what may affect it day to day, whether that be the RIPTA bus parked by the creek at the shopping center down the road or heavy rain fall leading to higher water levels. "It's just awareness for kids at this point," Long said. "Where do things come from and where do things go?"

Creating awareness, making connections and understanding cause and effect of personal actions on the natural world is the first step that points to early signs of stewardship. Millicent Todd, a founder of the Hog Island Audubon Camp once wrote, "Only by securing a sustained, genuine interest in nature on the part of children can we hope for a grasp of the need for conserving our natural resources before it's too late." Todd's words ring true, and I could now clearly see the importance and purpose of both arousing and capitalizing interest in the outdoors through initiatives like the Schoolyard Habitat Program.