Making Education Environmental

The Situation
Boise and surrounding Ada County are the fastest growing areas in Idaho with a population increase between 1990 and 2000 of 50 percent. Ada County accounts for 24 percent of the state’s total population. New residents have moved in from other areas of the country, especially from larger cities, where children have lost touch with the natural environment. It has been observed by teachers and University of Idaho (UI) Master Gardeners teaching in local elementary schools that most of the children have no experience with an agriculture or horticulture industry, and many have not even been out of town to enjoy Idaho’s natural resources like our forests and rivers.

The value of conserving our public lands, and teaching children that they are an inseparable part of the life support system we call our natural environment, are important concepts to get across. By stimulating interest in the natural environment, youth can develop positive attitudes toward conserving our natural resources. Youth also need to learn essential skills for finding answers to future environmental issues. Our goal was to create an exciting hands-on educational experience outdoors that fit into the school day. It had to blend knowledge about a sustainable natural resource industry with conservation of watersheds and plant and wildlife habitats.

Our Response
An integral part to truly understanding the natural environment is the face-to-face encounter with nature. The outdoors brings out a spontaneous enthusiasm in children to explore. Our base of educational operations for this nature encounter was Lucky Peak Nursery—the largest U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Nursery in Southern Idaho growing 3 million trees/year. In 1999, the University of Idaho Extension partnered with Lucky Peak Nursery personnel to help provide conservation education to youth. This partnership has continued for 9 years.

Tours of the nursery facilities and surrounding foothills were led, with presentations given, by both Nursery personnel and UI Master Gardener (MG) volunteers. These two-hour-long field tours combined explanations and demonstration of daily nursery operations with information on the importance of public lands, especially the value of the 191 million acres administrated by the Forest Service. Protecting the land for its many uses such as watersheds, plant and wildlife habitat, recreation and as a source of wood and minerals was discussed during the nursery tour and nature walk. The field tours were held annually from March through mid-June. Our target audience was preschool to sixth grade students, along with their teachers and parent chaperones. Occasionally high school classes participated.

During the nursery portion of the tour, students were given a working knowledge of tree biology, tree culture, seed harvesting and treatment techniques, along with seeds and seedling storage and packing operations. Demonstrations of equipment further introduced children to a variety of machines in use such as seed cleaners and extractors, refrigeration units, drying ovens, tree moisture meters, computerized greenhouses, tractors and other field equipment. The ¾ mile long nature walk that followed the nursery tour allowed children to use...
their senses to see, taste, feel and smell native plants. They learned how plants were used throughout history and their importance to wildlife. Viewing wildlife and insects during the nature walk was always a special treat. At the end of both the nursery tour and nature walk, each child was given a seedling tree or tree seed to plant at home or in a school project. Teachers were asked to fill out an evaluation on the field tours.

The tours, training and plant materials were provided at no cost to participants by the U.S. Forest Service and the UI Master Gardener volunteers. Schools paid for their own transportation to the site.

Program Outcomes
During the past 9 years, 10,683 students from 30 schools throughout Ada, Boise, Canyon and Elmore counties participated in the field tours.

Participant numbers (last 5 years)
2008 – 475 students, 115 adults
2007 – 1,446 students, 282 adults
2006 – 757 students, 170 adults
2005 – 1,053 students, 250 adults
2004 – 867 students, 190 adults

The field tours were an effective way to introduce children to the natural environment, promote conservation awareness and provide a working knowledge about a sustainable green industry. The nature walk combined the excitement of discovery with intellectual observation.

One spin-off from this outdoor experience was students furthered their skills in plant culture through the future assignment of planting a tree at home or in a school project. Another spin-off was teachers and chaperoning parents were exposed to methods of incorporating environmental education and sustainable natural resource knowledge and issues into existing curriculum.

Several teachers returned each year with a new group of students. They told us that the field tours were a highlight of the school year for students, and 98% of teacher evaluations expressed a need for continued opportunities to enhance curriculum with nature encounters and environmental education.

The Future
Children understand and remember concepts best when they learn through direct personal insights and hands-on experiences. By developing an appreciation for nature, children can become the best foundation for future conservation. These forestry field tours are an excellent teaching method for introducing students to natural resource conservation and environmental education. The University of Idaho Extension and Lucky Peak Nursery plan to continue offering the field tours.

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