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Environmental Education and the Social Studies: Making the Connections

In the 30 years since environmental education took wing, many social studies teachers have found themselves caught between believing in the importance of environmental education and feeling pressed to find the time to "fit" it in. Nationwide polls tell us that 96% of parents support teaching environmental education in the schools¹. When teachers are asked if environmental education is important, an overwhelming majority (97%) agrees. Yet in practice, few teachers consistently include environmental education in their curriculum².

One reason for this gap is that environmental education is often seen as an add-on, as something that only science teachers do, or as an activity used to celebrate Earth Day or Arbor Day. In reality, environmental education offers social studies teachers and students a powerful tool for integrating what they're learning in a real-world context. At its heart, environmental education is an integrative undertaking. Learning about the environment and environmental issues is a continuing lesson in interconnectedness. Environmental education offers opportunities for teaching across the social studies curriculum, integrating methods and ideas from history, civics, geography, and economics to help students develop the skills they need to understand connections in the environment.

One needs to go no further than the national standards to find ample evidence of the connections among the social studies and environmental education. Taken singly, each set of national standards in social studies (i.e., history, social studies, civics, economics, geography) incorporates learning and instructional goals that are aligned with those of environmental education. In *Geography for Life: The National Geography Standards*, for example, one finds, "how physical and human processes together shape places" and "ways in which different people perceive places and regions." Similarly, essential components of environmental education are found throughout the *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*³. The performance

expectations include, "consider existing uses and propose and evaluate alternative uses of resources and land in home, school, community, the region and beyond," and, "apply knowledge of economic concepts in developing a response to a current local economic issue such as how to reduce the flow of trash into a rapidly filling landfill."

Environmental education programs can be used to teach a variety of social studies concepts. As your students learn about the difference between human wants and needs or how different cultures interact with their environment, environmental education curriculum materials supply educationally sound lesson plans. As an example, the curriculum unit, *What Do We Need to Live on Planet Earth? A Case Study of the Traditional Rural Life in East Africa*⁴ developed for grades 2-4 by the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), provides a series of activities specifically designed for use in social studies and history. According to its developers, the unit "may be used at any point in the curriculum where students are asked to learn about people from other cultures, and to examine contemporary or more traditional lifestyles."

While studying specifically about the Masai and Kikuyu, students explore the basic question of what humans and other animals need to survive. As part of the unit, students are asked to build dwellings, considering both their form and function; examine the habitat needs of elephants and how these relate to the needs of the Masai; and make predictions about the use of water. Units such as this go a long way to providing examples of how to meet the goals of social studies and environmental education.

Creating a comprehensive, cohesive environmental education program that meshes with the standards-based social studies curriculum can be a daunting task. There are several resources now available to help teachers integrate environmental learning into social studies program. *Excellence in Environmental*

*Education-Guidelines for Learning (K-12)*⁵ sets expectations for performance and achievement in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades, suggests a framework for effective and comprehensive environmental education programs and curricula. These guidelines are also linked to national disciplinary standards. They demonstrate how environmental education can be used to meet standards set by the social studies.

Social studies teachers can find more help in *The Environmental Education Collection-A Review of Resources for Educators (Vols. 1, 2 & 3)*, published by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE).⁶ These collections are designed to help teachers select instructional materials that meet their needs and the needs of their students. Each volume reviews a broad range of K-12 educational materials (e.g., curriculum guides, videos, and CDs). All of these materials have gone through an extensive evaluation by teachers, environmental educators, and content specialists.

The Biodiversity Collection-A Review of Biodiversity Resources for Educators, published by World Wildlife Fund in association with NAAEE, is another resource. This compendium of exemplary K-12 resources is designed to help educators find high-quality biodiversity education materials including curriculum guides, children's books, posters, and multimedia resources. All of the resources are indexed by grade level, subject area (e.g. social studies, economics), and topic (e.g., energy, population, solid waste, and social action).

Need more resources?

There are a number of other resources available to help educators use environmental education to help create a comprehensive social studies curriculum. Some of them are listed below as references to this information sheet. Others are available on the databases of Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Eisenhower National Clearinghouse (ENC). On line, these resources can be accessed by typing

<http://www.eelink.net>

Page down to CLASS-RESOURCES DIRECTORIES, to EE-RELATED EDUCATION SITES that will lead you to ERIC or ENC. You will then be able to search ERIC and ENC databases by following the appropriate pointers.

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