

# Supporting Community Based Environmental Education

## Discussion Paper Summary

**M**anaging the environment requires investment in the local community for two powerful reasons: 1) local activities affect the quality of the local environment and, 2) community members have a common interest in protecting and improving their community's quality of life.

This understanding has led both US EPA and USDA to promote environmental management via local decision making and voluntary compliance with regulations. It has also prompted these agencies to consider how they can better support these local processes and offer more effective environmental education to support them.

A 1996-98 project investigated ways to strengthen partnerships among USDA Cooperative Extension, US EPA, and communities in the service of these environmental management and education efforts. The project is summarized in *An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-Based Education: Discussion Paper*. What follows is a brief overview of the project's results and recommendations.

### Community-Based Education

Community-based education is not a new idea. In the past it was applied more commonly to issues of community economic development, housing, youth, and health than to environmental concerns.

Community-based education means more than "education based in the community." It implies an education plan created as a result of community involvement and designed to match community interests.

While numerous environmental education activities use this approach, its principles are generally not well-understood by either trained environmental educators or natural resource professionals.

Federal and state agency environmental management goals cannot be accomplished until environmental and natural resources professionals can collaborate confidently and competently with community members and professionals from other agencies.

**The capacity of democratic institutions to solve problems and create a better future depends on the knowledge and involvement of citizens in a community decision-making process that encourages systemic thought and broad-based action... Broad-based action is needed because local government alone cannot accomplish long-term solutions to community problems. Nor can individuals, businesses, community groups, or state and federal agencies do so by working in isolation.**

—President's Council on Sustainable Development, 1996

The term community-based environmental education is used to draw attention to several needs:

- To ensure that environmental education has an obvious connection to the community.
- To emphasize the link between local activities and a quality environment.
- To ensure that environmental education is relevant to people's lives.

Recent research has revealed how community members work together to make change and how individuals make decisions about what they will do. This offers a foundation for a new understanding of how environmental education can affect decision-making.

### Project Focus

This project focused on two issues: how to support community involvement in decision-making about the environment, and how to most efficiently and effectively use the strengths of the sponsoring agencies, US EPA and USDA Cooperative Extension, when working with communities. Project findings are presented in terms of EPA and Cooperative Extension roles and partnership possibilities.

Many other agencies and groups also work on environmental topics and/or with communities. The project did not ignore their work or minimize its value. Rather,

it closely examined opportunities to improve partnership between the sponsoring organizations.

As EPA, Extension, and communities strive to understand and improve their partnerships, agency staffs will need to analyze how, where and when to become involved. In many cases, other organizations or agencies are better positioned to provide financial and technical support.

Consequently, EPA and Extension professionals need to appreciate their own strengths and understand which conditions make them uniquely positioned to instigate or facilitate an activity.

In pursuing the project goals, the steering committee reviewed research, written case studies, and EPA and USDA agency activities. It also investigated exemplary local programs. These were selected for having three crucial elements:

1) considering the whole community, 2) linking environmental education to management of local ecological units, and 3) linking environmental education to goals for community sustainability.

The project's findings are based on these resources and on comments from participants and experts. Specific observations and recommendations are reported in detailed tables in the report and are summarized in other pamphlets in this series (referenced by number, see page 4 for titles). These address:

- Elements of a good community-based education model. (6, 7, 8)
- Tools or resources needed to better facilitate community-based education about the environment. (6)
- EPA and Cooperative Extension roles and partnership issues. (2, 3, 4, 5)

The project report also includes a separate, lengthy appendix which has an annotated bibliography of research and published case studies, and detailed summaries of individual and group discussions.

## Report Results

The project described partnership goals and produced six major findings. These summarize key actions that US EPA and Extension professionals can take to strengthen partnerships and support local decision making.

## US EPA/Cooperative Extension Partnership Goals

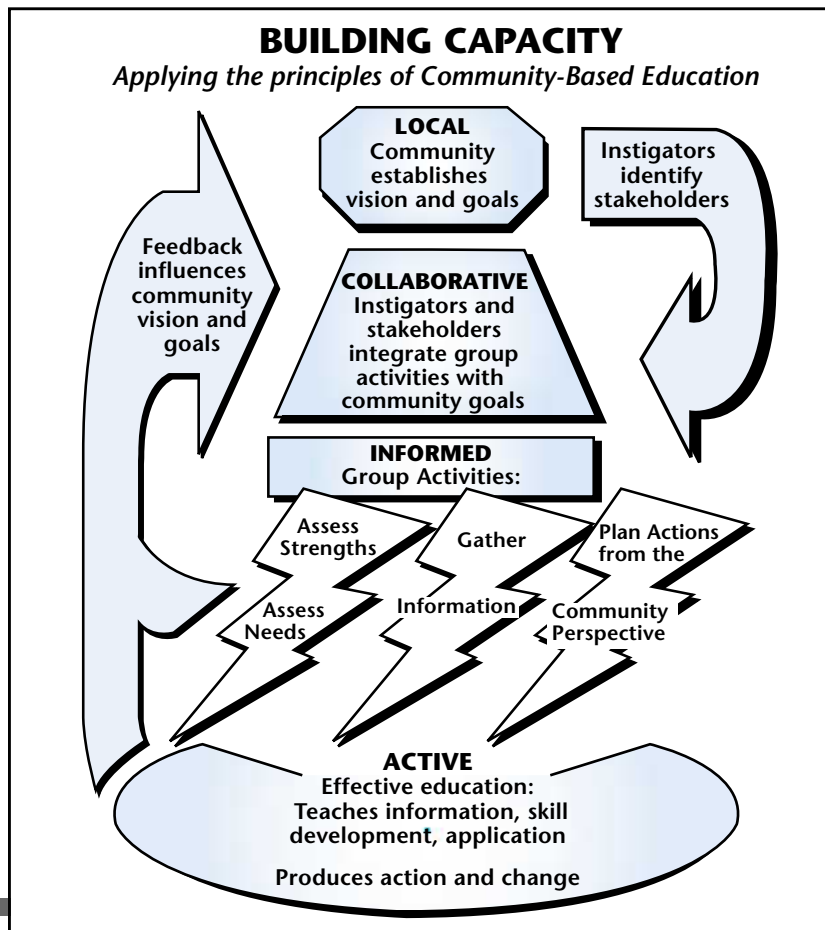
The goals of partnerships are to enhance community efforts that:

- Expand the community's capacity to improve environmental quality.

- Integrate environmental management goals with other community development activities.
- Lead to environmental improvement.
- Increase involvement of more community interests (both groups and points of view) in community environmental management activities.

The internal goals for partnerships are to:

- Ensure that staff understand the principles of community-based education and commit to using it in their work, as appropriate.
- Ensure that communities have access to the information they need and know how to use the information.
- Ensure that staff have opportunities to work collaboratively.



## Recommendations - Six Findings

To meet these partnership goals US EPA and Cooperative Extension professionals should work cooperatively to:

### **Finding 1 - Commit to authentic efforts with communities.**

This means that participants' perspectives and contributions can, and often do, change the direction or focus of the effort. Goals are established through genuine collaboration, and all participants commit to them, even when they differ from the initial ideas, plans, or missions of some participants.

### **Finding 2 - Be ready to support community assumption of responsibility for environmental management.**

Professionals should find or create resources that enable communities to respond effectively.

### **Finding 3 - Become familiar with a community-based approach.**

Professionals should understand which members of a community are affected, how to use a community-based model for supporting local education, and how to assess where their expertise might fit.

### **Finding 4 - Make every effort to improve their own ability to facilitate community-based education and to support community educators with the information and skills they need to be effective.**

**Finding 5 - Understand their role in local initiatives.** EPA and Extension professionals should understand and be able to articulate their own organization's

general legislative mandate, how that applies to supporting community-based education, and what the organization is doing in the area. Then, they must investigate how personal professional development and collaborating with others could help them evolve in their own role, keeping in mind the missions of other involved groups.

### **Finding 6 - Work collaboratively to:**

- Coordinate their efforts with each other and officially support their partnership.
- Exercise flexibility in how they apply their resources and skills.
- Help describe environmental and socio-economic characteristics of communities or geographic regions.
- Make existing resources more readily available.
- Determine appropriate opportunities for input of their expertise with communities.
- Expand the role of communities and partners.
- Set priorities for how they will work with communities.
- Provide professional development opportunities for themselves.
- Celebrate successes and give credit to all organizations that participate.

## **An Opportunity**

US EPA and USDA Cooperative Extension each have proven strategies and resources for working with communities. The strengths of these agencies have been and can be powerful tools in supporting both the goals identi-

fied by EPA in the Community-Based Environmental Protection program and the goals of the President's Council on Sustainable Development.

Steps that bring agency professionals together will allow these talented and committed people to devise ways to expand use of their skills and resources.

Re-examining EPA's environmental goals, interests, and capabilities would highlight ways to encourage and support locally-based environmental education efforts. EPA's capabilities include information, assessment techniques, financial resources, shared approaches, agency coordination, and enforcement policy adjustment.

Similarly, state Extension services can exercise their considerable talents as experts, conveners, educators, and facilitators, applying these talents to environmental topics. Extension personnel can constructively engage the expertise and resources of public agencies, such as the US EPA, with community agencies and interest groups.

We face a challenging social, political, and fiscal climate. Since these organizations share similar objectives – linking resources and people – it is both necessary and proper that they become partners. Their combined strengths can help build capacity among local citizens and communities to identify and address their environmental challenges. Each organization believes that:

- Citizen-based efforts can make a difference.
- Linking the expertise of natural resource professionals with that of education professionals is a key to successful local efforts.

- Community and national partnerships are necessary to develop accurate information and disseminate it economically. What remains is to establish working partnerships in communities across the country.

A model for establishing working partnerships is described in the project report: *An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-Based Education: Discussion Paper*. The call to action from that report urges collaboration to help citizens address community environmental concerns and offers benchmarks for success.

## A Call to Action

The Project Steering Committee expects that using project findings will help the sponsoring agencies establish collaborative relationships. These relationships will link local, regional, and national resources to provide accurate and cost-effective mechanisms that help citizens better identify and address environmental concerns in their communities.

EPA and Cooperative Extension will know they have been successful in adapting to a new way of

doing business when they find that communities are:

- Assessing their own environmental management needs.
- Devising strategies for managing and monitoring improvement.
- Expressing satisfaction in seeing improvement in local environmental quality and protection.

—*An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-Based Education: Discussion Paper, 1998*

### For further information

*An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-Based Education: Discussion Paper*, EPA 910-R-98-008, US Environmental Protection Agency, Region 10, August 1998, 31 pp. URL: <http://www.reeusda.gov/nre/gifs/usdaepa.pdf>

*Appendices to An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-Based Education: Discussion Paper*, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension—Environmental Resources Center, August 1998, 130 pp. approx.

### Other pamphlets in this series

Leadership Roles for Cooperative Extension – Building Partnerships for Strong Communities, No. 2, 4 pp.

Linking to US EPA – A County Extension Guide to the EPA, Region 5, No. 3, 6 pp.

Leadership Roles for US EPA – Forging Solutions for Sustainable Communities, No. 4, 4 pp.

Linking to Cooperative Extension – A US EPA Guide to Cooperative Extension in Region 5 States, No. 5, 6 pp.

Building Capacity – Educating for Community Action, No. 6, 4 pp.

Building Capacity – From Transferring to Transforming, No. 7, 4 pp.

Building Capacity – Community-Based Environmental Education in Practice, No. 8, 4 pp.

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