



Environmental Literacy in New Jersey: A Call to Action



Section 1 New Jersey Commission on Environmental Education, Interagency Work Group and Affiliate Agencies and Organizations

The New Jersey Commission on Environmental Education and Interagency Work Group are state level groups statutorily charged with implementing a master plan for environmental education in New Jersey.

The commission has formally existed through Executive and Administrative Orders since 1989. The commission and work group were statutorily established in 1996 (without funding) with passage of the New Jersey Environmental Education Act (N.J.S.A. 18A:6-91.1 et seq.). Both groups are “in but not of” the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Department management provides guidance regarding state environmental priorities and environmental education staff provide administrative support and have secured limited funds for commission and work group activity during this time. The DEP is committed to the work of the commission and work group as a means for helping to achieve the department’s mission in environmental protection.

The New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) was instrumental in helping to establish the commission and has maintained active leadership and membership on the commission since its inception. The inclusion of environmental education in the New Jersey core curriculum content standards and high school graduation requirements has more recently been established, as well as opportunities for its integration into curriculum and instruction, professional development, after-school programs, career and technical education, and assessment. The DOE is committed to assisting with the implementation of this revised plan in order to help further the delivery of comprehensive and rigorous environmental education in New Jersey schools.

The commission is a voting body comprised of twenty-nine seats. The majority of its members are private citizens representing select groups with interests in environmental education delivery, such as public and private schools, nature centers and museums, colleges and universities, local government, civic and environmental organizations, labor and industry, and others. Some of these citizens also represent specific organizations, such as the New Jersey Education Association, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, and the New Jersey School Boards Association. Finally, the commission includes government designees representing state agencies with interests in environmental education. These include the state departments of Environmental Protection, Education, Higher Education, Law and Public Safety and Health and Senior Services. Commission members have helped plan and implement certain environmental education activities featured in the founding statute and/or the New Jersey environmental master plan, advised DEP and other state agencies regarding their environmental education efforts, and helped promote environmental education news, resources and programs to New Jersey environmental education professionals as well as to the public at large.

The Interagency Work Group is a non-voting body comprised of representatives of select government agencies, such as the New Jersey Departments of Environmental Protection, Education, Agriculture, Human Services, Community Affairs, Children and Families, and others. The common ground uniting

work group members is that their work in some way supports the delivery of environmental education. During challenging economic times in the mid-1990s when the state's environmental education statute was still being formalized, the Interagency Work Group replaced the creation of a new environmental education office that would have been dedicated to commission and work group activities. Work group members have helped implement the state's master plan for environmental education by providing expertise, in-kind services and guidance to the commission, as well as limited fiscal resources.

The commission and work group's web site features additional information about how they were established, past contributions, and current activities. The site also features New Jersey's environmental education master plans, a list of commission and work group members, meeting information and links to relevant environmental education resources. Visit the web site at www.nj.gov/dep/seeds/njcee.

This revised master plan is being introduced during another economically challenging time for New Jersey when state funds and services are severely restricted and staffing is limited. However, opportunities to receive federal funds for environmental education or for stimulus-related projects have either taken place or hold promise for the future, state priorities in environmental protection and formal education offer consistent opportunities for environmental education and public interest in green, sustainable activities, stewardship, and nature exploration are on the rise.

The importance and relevance of environmental education for all ages is becoming increasingly clear. The urgency to advance its delivery effectively and efficiently throughout New Jersey, even during such challenging times, validates the ongoing efforts of the commission and work group and reinvigorates the commitments that DEP, DOE and other state-level government agencies and organizations have to help ensure the successful implementation of this revised environmental education master plan. This plan refocuses the work of the commission and work group to:

- Assist with implementation of an environmental literacy plan for grades pre-K-12 (described further in other sections of this plan) that supports learner goals in environmental literacy for all students;
- Promote environmental literacy plan to NJ environmental education providers and encourage them to align local school-based environmental education initiatives with its goals and priorities;
- Promote the knowledge, attitudes and values, skills and behaviors in this plan to NJ environmental education providers and encourage them to align local adult, youth and family-oriented informal programs with them, and help implement the plan's four strategic initiatives;
- Assist with promotion of a statewide system for green jobs training and employment, workforce development and environment-related career opportunities and support the inclusion of sustainable, green practices in all career and workforce training programs;
- Encourage the inclusion of education-based school design features in new school construction plans, so that new facilities and grounds can be linked with green school curriculum and instruction;
- Bring together, through environmental education forum(s), the plans and needs of New Jersey's larger-scale environmental education efforts, such as those that focus on sustainability, campus and green school activities, environmental justice and environmental health education efforts;
- Promote the use of national guidelines for excellence regarding environmental education programs, training and materials, to NJ environmental education providers;
- Assist with promotion of a statewide coalition and campaign to get children and families outdoors;
- Collaborate on the leveraging of federal, state and private funds in order to further the delivery of specific components of this revised environmental education master plan for all citizens;

- Increase electronic communications between the commission and work group and NJ environmental education providers and the promotion of environmental education grants as well as new research, resources and services, through DEP's *EEdNEWS* service and announcements;
- Assist with the development and promotion of an electronic NJ environmental education directory of resources, expertise and services; and
- Track select activities that are part of this plan and provide reports annually on results and progress.

The commission and work group work in partnership with the Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education (ANJEE). ANJEE is New Jersey's professional statewide not-for-profit organization for environmental education professionals and is supported by volunteers. It offers members an array of services, such as an annual statewide conference and leadership retreat, regional programs, a newsletter and web site, and electronic resource-sharing services. Alliance leadership will revise ANJEE's strategic plan in order to help implement *A Call to Action* during the next few years. It is also committed to promoting the use of national environmental education guidelines for excellence and determining the value of having a formal certification program for formal and/or informal environmental educators. Finally, ANJEE began advocating at national and state levels for policies that would advance the field of environmental education for all ages. To learn more about ANJEE, visit www.anjee.net.

ANJEE is New Jersey's affiliate member of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). NAAEE is the nation's only professional association for environmental education. Its members strive to promote professional excellence in informal organizations, K-12 classrooms, universities (both instructors and students), government agencies, and corporate settings throughout North America and in over 55 other countries. Its demonstrated leadership in environmental education research, standards and best practices, advocacy, enrichment and other activities are referenced throughout this plan. The NAAEE has also taken a leadership role to help further federal support for environmental education, such as through passage of the *No Child left Inside* bill and the reauthorization of the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Education Act, which are mentioned later in this plan. To learn more about NAAEE, visit www.naaee.org.

Commission and work group activities would include hosting environmental education leadership forums during the next five years with representatives of New Jersey's larger-scale environmental education initiatives and statewide providers. Initiatives to be highlighted at the forums would include sustainability education, campus and green school activities, environmental justice, conservation education, citizen science and community leadership, nature study, gardening and outdoor classrooms, environmental careers and green collar jobs, and environmental health education. The purpose of the forums is to bring together leaders in these areas for planning, information sharing, collaboration and networking. The sharing of reports between these groups would be supported on an ongoing basis.

Committee work would also be conducted by the commission and work group and would focus on priority tasks identified in this revised environmental education master plan. Interested professionals and members of the public would be invited to participate on these committees.

Many of the recommendations in this plan, along with much of the commission and work group's ongoing work, are based on findings and recommendations from numerous national and state resources that are recognized in a reference list provided in the appendices of this plan.