

## Students Motivate Themselves in Environmental Education

K-12 students in Kenya, Paris, or San Diego all have one significant commonality: the environment. What Inconvenient Truth did for raising the bar on environmental education is, without a doubt, “global awareness?” I think whoever watches it, even if they don’t agree with the message, gets a clear picture of how different aspects of the environment are directly connected to our life styles. Every class of my high school students watching that movie have concluded with the question, “What can I do?” Young people today do care about what happens with the environment; yet many feel overwhelmed or powerless in dealing with environmental issues. My experience leads me to believe that the time has arrived to capture their interest with learning experiences to discover appropriate care of tomorrow’s healthy environment, which means providing environmental education that is academically focused and civically pointed.

Service learning contributes to student education, along with building social skills: character building. Service-learning is considered a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Constructivists (e.g., Brooks & Brooks, 1999) propose that students actively create their own knowledge using real world situations to examine essential concepts in a context that is personally meaningful. Service-learning has been around since for almost 100 years as a method to enhance education. Since the early 1990’s there have been more and more legislative efforts and comprehensive national programs to emphasize and support this learning. Today, there’s a growing interest on the part of educators as more studies point out the cross-curriculum benefits.

Producing projects that combine service learning and environmental education is easily accomplished to fulfill lesson objectives and it can be molded to fit class characteristics. Here are two examples of projects for grades 5-12: A) students in a middle school science class studying the environment help preserve the species of birch trees, local to their area, by raising money to purchase some small birch trees and then plant them at a local park or forested area; B) students concerned with the quality of the environment organize a recycling effort at school by establishing and carrying-out a schedule of regularly picking up recyclable materials from classes and offices; then depositing that material in a campus bin that is picked up by a recycle vendor. There are volumes of benefits for students participating in a project.

Educators have to take the lead in class environmental projects. The teacher has to get them pointed in the right direction, assist them in getting organized, and keep them on track. When I hear my students asking about what they can do, I take their interest down to our local level. We begin talking about ideas to clean up the campus, teaching other students about the environment, or doing some work in the neighborhood. We begin with brainstorming on ideas as a class. The next step is alignment, making a commitment as a class to take some action on at least one project we have discussed. The last step is the most comprehensive because it involves the actual project work. The pivotal point is the students taking control and running the project work, which happens when the teacher becomes a resource or Subject Matter Expert. If you want a copy of my Environmental Project Packet, which helps the students and I stay organized, you can receive it for free by [clicking here](#).

There’s a multitude of projects that integrate environmental stewardship with academic success. This project type is totally compliant with current Standards. From a teacher point of view, as much as I want to deny it, the fact remains: I must teach to the test to have my students succeed. Below are two of the [National Science Education Standards](#) whose scope is deep enough to encompass most environmental service learning projects for grades 5-12:

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- *Content Standard B*: The program of study in science for all students should be developmentally appropriate, interesting, and relevant to students' lives; emphasize student understanding through inquiry; and be connected with other school subjects.

- *Content Standard C*: Teachers of science engage in ongoing assessment of their teaching and of student learning.

I guarantee all teachers this: if you have the time and sincere motivation, the students will gladly partner with you on completing an environmental project. It's a win-win situation: the students win in academics and in skill building, the teacher wins as the students learn while practicing responsibility, and the environment is nurtured. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or want to receive support in getting an environmental education project started with your class(es).

### Resources

[North American Association for Environmental Education \(NAAEE\)](#)

[Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) Environmental Education](#)

[National Service Learning Clearinghouse](#)

[National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey](#)

### References

Brooks, Jacqueline Grennon, Martin Brooks. In search of understanding: The case for constructivist classrooms. Alexandria, VA; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999.

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