



Still Developing the Toolbox:

Making EE Relevant for Culturally Diverse Groups

By Joanne M. Lozar Glenn

To interest kids in birds and animals, educators at a nature center in the northwestern United States made them beautiful temporary tattoos of native creatures. But many of the tattoos didn't show up well on brown skin—they'd been made by white educators.

Halfway around the world, NGO staff in Pakistan wanted to educate the people about saving the mangrove forests, not realizing they were being depleted because people needed the trees for survival. After program planners got over their shock at not being able to tell the community what to do, they redesigned the program, found leaders in the community, and sent the message through them.

Were these two programs successes or failures? "This field is such that you cannot assess success immediately in the short term," said Sabiha Daudi, assistant professor of EE, curriculum, and instruction at Northern Illinois University (DeKalb, IL). "I see people at different points on the continuum of environmental learning."

Daudi helped develop, and now teaches, the online course "Making EE Relevant to Diverse Audiences" (MEER)*, which examines issues of diversity and cultural awareness in environmental education. Taught through the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, the course aims to raise awareness of learners' cultural perspectives so that these perspectives do not become unwitting stumbling blocks when working with EE in diverse communities. As a result, learners increase their cultural competency.

Ross Andrews, a participant, said the course "challenged you to think about the way you perceive environmental issues." Director of the Walnut Creek Wetland Park in Raleigh, NC, Andrews is a Caucasian working in an underserved African-American and Latino community. "My experience in nature was profound in terms of developing my own identity," Andrews said. "I began to feel a strong responsibility to provide that opportunity to others. Now I have specific tools and a more refined awareness of how to do that."

Photo provided by Sabiha Daudi



Sabiha Daudi hiking in Costa Rica.



Ross Andrews, Kharisma Johnson, and Sinclair Pender plant native species in the wetland-pond at Carnage Magnet Middle School in Wake County, North Carolina. (This project was made possible by a grant from Recreational Equipment Incorporated [REI] to Partners for Environmental Justice.)

Andrews, like other people interviewed for this article, is in the early stages of developing programs designed to connect with communities different from those into which they were born. Influenced by what he learned in the course, Andrews plans to include multicultural perspectives in his approach to environmental education. For example, he's designed a series of programs based on the evolution of George Washington Carver's understanding of nature, which grew from childhood experiences discovering the intricacies of plant life in the forests around his family's farm.

In one sense, Andrews and educators like him are starting from scratch: there are few models of fully mature, culturally relevant EE programs. Even if there were, to apply one formula across the board runs the risk of oversimplifying complex issues, noted Laura Downey, executive director of the Kansas Association for Conservation and EE.

Complexity and nuance underlie the simplest actions involved in carrying out this work, even as growing recognition of its importance creates a groundswell of attention to cultural competency training and programming initiatives. One issue, identified by Daudi as the field's biggest challenge, is not being able to agree on a definition of diversity.

"We should get beyond the philosophizing, agree, and then just work on it," Daudi said. Yet, she acknowledged, the consensus is necessary so that everyone can move forward with shared understanding.

Meanwhile, on-the-ground initiatives are collecting some of the experiences that will inform, and likely transform, the field. "We've reached a point in the movement where we know we should do this," said Mary Ford, program manager at the National Audubon Society (Washington, DC). "People are trying, but we're still developing the toolbox."

In this article, you'll find some of the tools in that toolbox (see sidebar, "On the Ground") and profiles of programs and people connecting with culturally different communities—no matter how those differences are defined.

Intercambios:

Inclusion Means Real-World Immersion

Formally established in 2004, Intercambios helps organizations get better at creating inclusive, sustainable solutions to problems in the community and in the environment.

What that looks like: Lisa LaRocque, based in Las Cruces, NM, and Alma Galván in Juarez, Chihuahua, México, collaborating on services like community and organizational development and cultural competency training throughout the United States and Mexico.

LaRocque and Galván have delivered one-day workshops* to organizations that want to learn more about being culturally inclusive. But after tracking results, they concluded that the workshops didn't accomplish what they wanted them to achieve.

"[Inclusion] is a lifelong learning process," LaRocque said. "It requires immersion, reflection, a shift in the way one thinks, the ability to be empathic and to learn through first-hand experiences what you need to know."

Instead, Intercambios decided to track the changes in three organizations (selected through an application process) as they tried to become more inclusive.* "We consider ourselves a learning community, because we have no way of guiding [what will happen] nor would we presume to," LaRocque said. "But we are all sincerely interested in learning how to internalize the changes that make us more inclusive."

The two-year-long exploration process involves regular dialogue within the learning community. Intercambios conducts individual and group interviews every three to four months. Conference calls are recorded, transcribed, and sent to the organizations for reflection. Face-to-face meetings happened at the beginning and midpoint of this initiative. "Lessons learned" by the three organizations about becoming more inclusive will be collected at an upcoming meeting and shared with the EE community.

The reflection process, in which participants discuss where they are and why, what holds them back and what moves them forward, has proved illuminating. "In the beginning, they felt they had to know more, read newspapers, do training [about inclusiveness]," LaRocque said. "All of a sudden, though, they said, 'Forget it, I'm spinning my wheels, I just have to get out there [and do it].'"

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- Lisa LaRocque

“[Inclusion] is not a book experience,” LaRocque added. “This is a real world immersion. In environmental education if you want someone to learn about a wetland you take them up to their chest in water. It works the same way for inclusiveness practices—you go into their world just as deep.”

Kansas Association for Conservation and EE: Reaching Urban and Native Audiences

In Kansas, some of our cultural diversity exists in urban areas,” said Laura Downey, KACEE’s executive director. It also exists on Kansas’ five tribal lands. KACEE uses materials from Projects Learning Tree, WET, and WILD to deliver EE programming in both settings.

Urban audiences

“The strategy is to modify the way we deliver Project Learning Tree to meet the needs of urban educators,” Downey said. “In this case, their needs are related to [having] a way to access science that was relevant to their students.”

The teachers didn’t feel comfortable teaching in outdoor environments nor did they feel they had access to such spaces. So KACEE helped teachers find ways to use the school grounds and community for environmental inquiry and exploration.

First, they connected teachers to two grant programs (*OWLS [Outdoor Wildlife Learning Sites]* and *Green Schools*) and provided examples of how other teachers in Kansas City had applied for and used similar funds. Then they helped teachers understand the value of using EE to make learning in other subjects more relevant to students.

As a result, teachers are excited about inviting KACEE into the school to do more programs. “Before, thinking they couldn’t teach EE at all was an immediate barrier to making content culturally relevant to students,” Downey said. “Now that the door is open, I can get into the diversity issues.”

Tribal communities

KACEE staff began their work with the Kickapoo nation by participating in an in-service with its school’s teachers on tribal property to understand the needs of the students and the community. “Not being teachers or native Americans,” Downey said, “we let them tell us what they needed so we could modify our workshops to meet their needs.” This required a good deal of time up front talking with teachers and administrators.

The strategy is to modify the way we deliver Project Learning Tree to meet the needs of urban educators.

- Laura Downey

KACEE staff learned that the community wanted to help students reconnect with their environment. “The teachers and administrators said that like kids everywhere, they’ve disconnected with the natural spaces around them,” Downey said. “It becomes important because it’s a part of their culture that has been degraded over time.”

The public water supply on the tribal land was frequently out of compliance with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations, so the school community chose to focus on “taking better care of our water.” The water cycle became the symbol for the theme of interconnectedness. Students created multiple community outreach projects, among them a rain garden to absorb rainwater runoff, and two students presented programs at the KACEE conference.

“Both [student presenters] applied for and received EPA summer internships and decided they wanted to work on degree programs related to the environment so they could be better resources for the community,” Downey said.

Reflecting on the program’s success, Downey advised that environmental educators should “never go in assuming we know how to make this happen. We rely heavily on the folks who are part of that culture to teach us what it is that can help them connect kids to their environment.”

Sierra Nevada Journeys: Meeting Kids Where They Are

Science classrooms, after school programs, field trips, residential outdoors schools, and professional development for formal and nonformal educators—these are the ways Sierra Nevada Journeys creates multiple touchpoints for the children and the communities it serves.

Sierra Nevada Journeys was founded in 2007 to provide experiential and place-based education in western Nevada and northern California. The idea is to reach and empower its audiences—children in 21st-century and traditional schools, from low and high socioeconomic classes, of varying ethnicities and learning abilities—with good educational programming that meets their needs and lays the foundation for ongoing relationships.

Photo provided by Kristen Ashbaugh



Multi-aged campers explore and work together during the Sierra Nevada Journeys Lamoille Institute for Educators (LIFE) Conference.



Nick Pretsky of Sierra Nevada Journeys shares a “tree cookie” with students at Silver Saddle Ranch in Carson City, Nevada.

It’s about meeting kids where they are and giving them the opportunity to experience and explore their own environment—then move from their environment to the bigger world.

- Laurie Gray

“Ideally we see the same kids several times over the course of several years,” said Laurie Gray, Sierra Nevada Journeys’ professional development coordinator. “We hope to open up a world they haven’t been exposed to before.”

Staff customize environmental education programming to their audiences. In a school with a predominantly Hispanic population, for example, staff will learn about that specific setting and create appropriate background materials, using visual aids to help with language

barriers. In working with Camp Care, a program for adults whose cognitive abilities are at the third- to fifth-grade level, staff work on “scaffolding language and concepts and making modifications based on checks for understanding throughout the lesson,” Gray explained.

In either case, lessons are broken into smaller components, and staff practice teaching them until they are comfortable. Less-experienced staff observe more experienced educators delivering a lesson before they teach it on their own.

Each week the staff meets and reviews participant feedback on their programs. One week, for example, Sierra received this letter from the mother of a young man who had attended the “Journeys Outdoors School” residential program:

Our son was known to be introverted and very shy in school. It was difficult to get him out of his books or away from his computer.

At the end of the week...he was a different boy, in a good way. Even Matthew’s brother saw the difference. ‘Wow, Matthew grew up. He’s bigger, look.’

Indeed he did look bigger. Matthew stood taller with more confidence and wore a genuine smile that spread to his eyes. The sight warmed my heart.

—Mom of a fifth-grade, special needs camper

“Building quick, strong, respectful relationships like these is critical to what we do,” Gray said. “It’s about meeting kids where they are and giving them the opportunity to experience and explore their own environment—then move from their environment to the bigger world.”

Native Waters Community Education Program: Caring for Water, Caring for Life

Scott Frazier directs Project WET’s Montana-based Native Waters community education program, which promotes awareness and stewardship of water resources in indigenous communities and around the world.

“The idea was to coordinate and bridge Project WET and its partners with tribal groups,” Frazier said,* “to get out and make contacts to see if we could build long-term relationships.” Frazier also wanted to learn if the curriculum materials they were using were culturally acceptable, and whether native communities could take Project WET’s curriculum and develop it into place-based, local-educator-delivered activity guides.

There was good news and bad news.

“The curriculum is good on its own,” Frazier said. “The problem is the [Project WET] network’s ability to keep a strong connection to the tribe.”

The connections are frail because, for example, as happened once, a Project WET coordinator may make a faux pas that inadvertently disrespects tribal sovereignty or protocols. “Then the native person stops talking to the coordinator and talks directly to me,” Frazier, a Santee and Crow tribal member, said. “[The community] still wants the curriculum. They just don’t want to deal with that person anymore.” And the coordinator withdraws, afraid of making more mistakes.

Training is helpful for raising awareness, Frazier believes, and the more you apply the training the more second nature it becomes. “But



Photo provided by Nina Hapner

Scott Frazier with participants at a Native Waters workshop at the Ramona Tribal wetlands project.

Ultimately, you have to be in the field to see how it works. [You have] to go out and make the mistakes, and then figure out how to make that better.

- Scott Frazier

ultimately you have to be in the field to see how it works,” he said, “to go out and make the mistakes, and then figure out how to make that better.”

Frazier is encouraged by what has been learned in the effort to bridge traditional environmental education with native science in these often overlooked communities. “Some of the non-native coordinators have [demonstrated they are] interested and compassionate and want to help,” Frazier said. “And they’re not afraid of making mistakes because I’ve taught them how to fix them.”

It’s like what Miles Davis reportedly said about jazz: When you hit a wrong note, it’s the next note that makes it good or bad.

“My indicator is always Katrina,” Scott Frazier said, recalling his T.V. vigil of the devastation the 2005 hurricane caused in New Orleans. “[I was thinking] none of these people know how to make clean water to drink. They’re waiting for bottled water. That’s why what we’re doing is so important.”

National Audubon Society: Connecting with, Building Communities

When you think of the Audubon Society, you might picture white baby boomers tramping through woods in search of birds. That’s the stereotype, one not too far removed from historical reality.

But under executive president John Flicker’s leadership, that stereotype is changing. Flicker has refocused Audubon towards inclusion via two initiatives funded by grants from Toyota and REI: *TogetherGreen* and *REI Nuestra Naturaleza, Nuestra Comunidad (Our Nature, Our Community: Bringing Nature Home to All Americans)*.

TogetherGreen

In this five-year, \$20 million program, Audubon is engaging diverse peoples across the United States in conservation action. The program has four components: innovation grants, a conservation fellowship program, a volunteer initiative, and a website.

Many projects target inner-city and non-English-speaking audiences underserved by the environmental community. In Texas, for example, high school and college students received internships at nature centers, training in wildlife biology, conservation planning, and habitat data collection. In rural western Virginia, a community collected, filled, and stored rain barrels for watering the land during dry spells. At a high school in Washington, DC, students participated in energy conservation activities, learning to install solar panels and exploring the role of green technology in creating job opportunities.

Though *TogetherGreen* is just one year old, it has already reached more than three million people and generated small changes that are making a difference. “There’s been a lot of shared learning between fellows and grantees,” said program manager Melissa Hopkins. “People are being forced to think in new ways. Kids are building their confidence, learning things they can take home and use.”

As the program progresses, external evaluation teams from Stanford University, Clemson University, and Virginia Tech will provide more objective measures of success. “We want to look at this long-term,” Hopkins said. Because it’s not just about the grants, she believes—it’s about building community. And that is a long-term, intensive process.

“We’re trying to create an open culture of discussion,” Hopkins said. “It’s *kaizen*—the Japanese word for constant improvement and reflection.”

Nuestra Naturaleza, Nuestra Comunidad

This one-year-old initiative focuses on creating culturally relevant programs in three Audubon centers (Seward Park, Seattle, WA; Debs Park, Los Angeles, CA; and Rio Salado, Phoenix, AZ). Each center is in a fairly diverse, predominantly Latino, neighborhood.

“As the demographics of the country shift, it makes sense to rethink how we can engage all Americans in our work,” said Robert Petty, director of field support. “There is much to learn in connecting with new audiences that might not only change the way you’re doing your work but [also] *what* you’re doing.”

The program builds on the growing body of research that shows the importance of connecting people to nature—to build a conservation ethic, enhance creativity, and promote active learning. In Petty’s view, connecting is key. To achieve that, Audubon staff have participated in local festivals and hired community liaisons to involve community residents in developing programming that includes family participation.

“It is essential that we make the effort to become a part of the community, not just serve it,” Petty said. “We really need to listen and to include as many different perspectives from the community as we can.”



Juan Perlera, Jr. and instructor Victoria Munguia learn about local ecosystems at the Audubon Center at Debs Park.

There is much to learn in connecting with new audiences that might not only change the way you’re doing your work but [also] what you’re doing.

- Robert Petty

Though each community is already working with local partners to develop programs that meet community needs and interests, the project is too new to evaluate: some programs are just getting started. Others won't start until fall 2009.

On the Ground: Learnings

1. Stop reading. Get in the field. Be willing to make—and correct—mistakes.
2. Be aware of your own biases, including thinking that all people of one ethnic group are alike or that “diversity” is only visual. It can be based on class, economic status, age, sexual orientation, immigrant status, gender, education, race, nationality, religion, politics, ability/disability, etc.
3. Be sensitive to language. “Diversity” is a self-serving perspective; inclusion is an enriching one. But remember that inclusiveness is a person-to-person connection.
4. Submit to the community as a guest. Rather than bulldoze ahead, take a step back and be deliberate in your approach.
5. Have multi-lingual staff and offer program materials in other languages to eliminate language barriers. But remember that relevance is more than bridging language barriers—it's about cultural understanding and approaching programming by listening as much as possible.
6. Find an ambassador, someone who will help you understand the community and help the community understand you.
7. Inspire and invigorate—and connect to what is important to community members.
8. Find a mentor so you can learn the intricacies of this work.
9. Deal with the tough stuff and strive for open dialogue. Consider the platinum rule: Do unto others as they would have done unto them.
10. Remember that the work is never over.

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“We're approaching our work with openness and an interest in listening to our partners,” Petty added, “to create the positive changes we all want to see.”

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Resources

Profiled Programs

Intercambios

Lisa Larocque, Las Cruces, NM
intercambios@zianet.com

Kansas Association for Conservation and EE (KACEE)

Laura Downey, Kansas City, KS
www.kacee.org

National Audubon Society

Mary Ford, Washington, DC
www.audubon.org

Native Waters Program (Project WET)

Scott Frazier, Bozeman, MT
www.projectwet.org/nativewaters/

Sierra Nevada Journeys

Laurie Gray, Reno, NV
www.sierranevadajourneys.org

Additional Programs and Contacts

Forest Resource Education Center

Elizabeth Faircloth, Jackson, NJ
Elizabeth.Faircloth@dep.state.nj.us
Urban educators: urban literacy/professional development.

New York State Department of Conservation

Betsy Ukeritis, Long Island City, NY
bauerit@gw.dec.state.ny.us
NYC urban minorities. After-school conservation club, camps diversity program

Liberty State Park

Gina Provenzano, Jersey City, NJ
lspic@verizon.net
Urban African-Americans, and Spanish and Indian immigrants. Estuary explorer program.

OPAL (Organizing People, Activating Leaders)

Kevin O'Dell, Portland, OR
kevin@opalpdx.org
Urban dwellers, focusing on low-income, people of color, second- and third-generation immigrants, and new citizens. Breathe Project (health) and other issues around environmental justice.

(Continued on pages 12-13)

(Resources, continued)

Publications

Bonta, M. 2008. Kyra's path: Reflecting on his daughter's future, a father says the green movement must diversify. *Grist*, June 10, www.grist.org/article/diversity.

Cook, D. 2009. By the color of their skin: Tim Wise on the myth of a post-racial America. *The Sun Magazine*. July. www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/403/by_the_color_of_their_skin. Full text available in print edition.

Enderle, E. (ed.). 2007. *Diversity and the Future of the U.S. Environmental Movement*. Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. (Order a print copy or download files from <http://environment.yale.edu/news/5175>)

Madfes, T.J. 2004. *What's Fair Got to Do with It? Diversity Cases from Environmental Educators*. WestEd, www.WestEd.org.

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Running-Grass. Key ideas of multicultural environmental education. Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education. www.aeoe.org/resources/diversity/multicultural_ee_ideas.html

Sachatello-Sawyer, B., & Fenyvesi, S. 2004. Reaching out with respect: Environmental education in underserved communities. *Clearing* 115 (Winter): 1–4. <http://ee.wfpa.org/ee/>

Taylor, D. E. 2008. Diversity and the environment: Myth-making and the status of minorities in the field. *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy: Equity and the Environment* 15: 89–148.

Organizations, Contacts

Audubon Expedition Institute

www.lesley.edu/offcampus/term/gsass_etl_programs.html

Center for Diversity & the Environment

www.environmentaldiversity.org/

Center for Whole Communities

www.wholecommunities.org/

City Wild

www.citywild.org/

Earthwise Productions

www.earthwiseproductionsinc.com/

Koi Group

www.koigroup.com/

NAAEE (North American Association for Environmental Education)

www.naaee.org

OPAL (Organizing People, Activating Leaders)

www.opalpx.org

Spitfire Strategies

www.spitfirestrategies.com/

The Denver Foundation

www.nonprofitinclusiveness.org/

The Kenian Group Diversity Consultants

www.keniangroup.com/

Tufts University

www.tufts.edu/~jagyem01/

Curricula, Activities

Delivering Culturally Relevant EE to Diverse Audiences

http://eetap.org/pages/reaching_diverse_audiences.php?content_id=ACTIVITY_3_1_1&eof=1

Making EE Relevant to Culturally Diverse Audiences (MEER)

www.uwsp.edu/natres/eetap/index.aspx