

Research Brief – Summary

Building Capacity for Integrating Environmental Education With Community Empowerment: Interviews With Leaders in the Portland Metro Area

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Environmental Education Association of Oregon



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SUMMARY

The interviews reported here offered sixteen Portland leaders in youth and community development organizations and environmental education organizations an opportunity to share their experiences and ideas about collaboration among groups and about building Portland's collective capacity to support their distinct but overlapping missions.

The interviews were conducted in 2014 for the Environmental Education Association of Oregon with support from *Expanding Capacity in Environmental Education (EECapacity)* program, which is funded by the Office of Environmental Education of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through a cooperative agreement with the Cornell University Civic Ecology Lab, in partnership with the North American Association of Environmental Educators (NAAEE).

The local leaders interviewed worked for one of three types of organizations: groups with a primary mission focused on **youth or community development** (especially issues such as social and economic justice, education and equal opportunity, and inclusion of communities of color and other represented groups in local and regional leadership, institutions, and activities), groups with a primary mission focused on **environmental education** and/or environmental advocacy, and organizations that have **both environmental education and youth/community development** as core elements of their missions.

Needs and Priorities

Interview participants were asked first to think broadly about the general needs, priorities and values of the people they serve. They were then asked whether those issues are connected to environmental, conservation, or sustainability issues, and about specific priorities within these environmental topics.

General Priorities

The most frequently cited issues that respondents from both youth/community development and environmental education organizations believed were general priorities in their communities were:

- Economic Security
- Education
- Access to Healthy Food
- Elimination of Racial Inequities
- Access to Safe Natural Outdoor Spaces and Activities
- Affordable, Accessible Transportation

Other priorities noted by participants included health, housing, public safety, clean water, reducing social isolation, and youth leadership development.

All of these overall priorities were seen as being strongly related to environmental, conservation, or sustainability concerns. However, some of these linkages are indirect and difficult to perceive or act upon, especially for those under stress or concerned with immediate social and economic challenges.

Learning about these linkages and pursuing economic development that addresses environmental education and action on environmental issues was viewed as having benefits for communities on many levels, including multidisciplinary education and broader youth leadership development, local business development and job opportunities, and better housing, food, transportation, and health outcomes.

Priorities For The Environment

When asked which environmental, conservation, or sustainability issues are the most important to the people they serve, the most frequently raised topics were:

- Access to and Preservation of Natural Areas
- Climate Change and Energy Issues
- Healthy Food Systems
- Water Quality
- Transportation
- Resource Over-Consumption
- Wildlife, Fish, and Habitat Issues

Also mentioned: health issues, livability/walkability of neighborhoods, invasive species, and air quality.

Working Together: Until Now

All participants were asked about the extent to which their organizations have integrated both environmental education and community development in their programs to date.

Those working for youth and community development organizations reported that these groups have addressed environmental education in their programs. Some have begun this recently, and most partner with other organizations to help provide environmental education. Most of the program content they described combines environmental education or environmental action projects with other goals and activities such as youth and adult education and development, health and wellness promotion, job training or other economic development efforts.

Environmental education providers reported that youth and community development is an important aspect of their work and that they do address issues of economic development and equity, diversity, and inclusion in their programs. However, many of the examples given were largely theoretical or framed at the level of large-scale systems, and most responses indicated that environmental education providers often attempt to address these other community issues by themselves, without developing strong, ongoing partnerships or accessing expertise from community members or other organizations that have more experience in these topics and settings.

Based on these interviews, organizations with missions that include both youth/community development and environmental education tend to have more experience integrating these topics in their programs. Some of these programs explicitly integrate youth development and environmental education. For example, multidisciplinary, project-based education may use environmental topics as an integrative context for learning academic content, building problem solving abilities, developing skills and personal habits that support learning and wellness, and working toward responsible business and career development. Other programs focus mainly on education and human development but contain largely implicit environmental education through being conducted in natural outdoor settings in which the shared benefit of and responsibility for natural resources and environmental, conservation, and sustainability values are embedded.

Working Together: Moving Forward

Across all three groups, all those interviewed were enthusiastic about the potential for mutual support among environmental education efforts and other community organizations, including collective action on mutual programs and projects. Those interviewed believe that people in low-income communities and communities of color view environmental education as being relevant and important, to the same extent or even more so than the general population (despite assumptions to the contrary that may persist among some citizens and environmental professionals). Environmental education was especially deemed to be relevant to youth development, family health and wellness, neighborhood quality and livability, and future generations, all issues that are important in these communities.

However, the extent to which particular environmental education efforts are viewed as relevant in specific settings with specific community members may vary. The terms that are used and the specific content and process of environmental education matter, and must be carefully tuned to the culture and needs of specific settings and groups in order to be viewed as relevant and appealing.

Given that environmental education is viewed as relevant and important, the next question is how to make these efforts more effective at furthering the goals of all concerned.

Supporting Community-Based Environmental Education

The primary recommendation that emerged from these interviews is that in order to be effective, environmental education must be integrated within communities and within community-based organizations (i.e. geographically defined communities, communities of color, low-income communities, etc.) This can be achieved by building capacity within youth and community development organizations to create and deliver their own environmental education programs and by building strong partnerships between environmental education providers and community organizations. Both approaches place environmental education providers primarily in a supportive role, emphasizing ongoing relationships with self-determining communities, with many of the lead roles in program design and delivery fulfilled by community members.

Those working in community development organizations emphasized that in order for environmental education programs to be successfully adapted for different settings and groups, time and care must be taken to first build relationships and understand the perspectives, interaction style, and needs of each group. This will often be best accomplished by partnering with a member of the specific community group who can participate in and/or lead the design and delivery of particular content and activities. Logistics and other practical matters may require adjustments and planning for specific settings and communities – bilingual facilitators and communications, transportation, child care, scheduling, etc.

Environmental education providers reported awareness of these issues, and many had begun working toward addressing them through such means as trainings for staff and board members in cultural awareness, moving toward more emphasis on developing long-term relationships with community partners, and working to develop more flexibility and collaboration in program design and delivery.

When asked what their group can contribute to furthering the missions of potential partners, community development groups were described as contributing to environmental education efforts their experience working in strongly relational and networked communities, new connections with more people and groups, experience in less wasteful lifestyles and in working and living outdoors, the ability to bring under-represented voices and new ideas into policy and practice discussions, and capacity to help

environmental education providers become more culturally responsive, better communicators, and more connected to diverse communities.

Environmental education providers were described as offering to community development efforts new connections with more people and groups; increased health, wellness, and livability through outdoor activities and natural areas; and improved food systems and economic opportunities through sustainable practices in agriculture and industry, environmental restoration, housing and transportation, etc.

Overcoming Challenges to Collaboration

Several interview questions touched on barriers or challenges to effective collaboration among community organizations and environmental educators.

Continuing with the theme of basing environmental education within communities and community-oriented organizations, those who worked in community organizations emphasized that environmental educators must invest the time and care that is necessary in order to build robust, ongoing relationships in communities, from which specific program content or campaigns can emerge collaboratively. This contrasts with the common practice of preparing environmental educational content, programs or campaigns in advance and then inviting people to attend one-shot events or take part in other limited or generic forms of participation.

Similarly, environmental educators cited the challenge of working with numerous communities; it is difficult to fund the staff time and skills necessary to build long-term relationships with many different partners, act in a supportive rather than a leading role, customize program design for different communities, and develop communications that work well with wide and targeted audiences.

Both environmental educators and youth/community development organizers have a sense of urgency and time-criticalness about their missions that can drive them to focus narrowly on their top priorities and to take the lead in working to achieve those goals, thereby undermining the slower, more indirect processes of coalition-building and mission integration that may ultimately be more effective.

When asked directly “What are the barriers or challenges that can sometimes make it hard for environmental and other community groups to work together or support each other?” five major themes emerged:

- **Growing Relationships** – the challenge of building long-term supportive relationships between groups and individuals who work for youth and community development and environment, conservation, and sustainability outcomes
- **Funding Collaboration** – the difficulty of dedicating scarce staff time and organizational resources toward meeting with other groups and building mutual awareness and relationships; overcoming the structural pressure to compete with each other for limited funding
- **Developing Common Projects** – the challenge of looking for areas of intersection among missions rather than emphasizing identity-defining differences in missions; finding great topics for collective action that will generate mutual benefit, enthusiasm and success
- **Bridging Divisions Related to Race** – the challenge of overcoming structural, historical, personal and behavioral issues related to relations between communities of color and white-dominated institutions and organizations
- **Working With Language, Culture, and Logistics** – the challenge of improving cultural awareness and cultural responsiveness and overcoming language and logistical barriers when working across community and organizational boundaries.

These five major challenges are presented in detail in the report. An additional theme has to do with reciprocal stereotypes about environmental and community development efforts. Some community development leaders complained that environmental groups are “anti-people” and show more concern about ecosystems, other species, and “nature” (conceived as excluding people) than the needs of people. Conversely, some of the environmental educators expressed aversion to economic justifications for environmental actions, perhaps because real or imaginary impacts on families or economic systems are regularly used to prevent or derail progress on environmental, conservation, and sustainability issues. In short, those focused on issues of environmental sustainability often see runaway economic growth as the enemy of progress, along with the privileging of real or phony economic arguments as “trump cards” in policy discussions, while those focused on human needs and wants may see limits on resource use or economic development as the enemy of progress. Even when discussions are limited to setting environmental priorities, there are differences between those who focus on environmental health considerations directly related to near-term human wellness and those who take a long-term, big-picture view and focus on protecting ecosystems, species diversity, and the natural systems we all depend upon from disruption and failure caused by human impacts. Both groups emphasized that immediate family needs are easier to understand and more compelling causes for action compared to complex, large-scale, long-term, systemic issues—especially for people living with economic hardship or other major stress—and therefore explicit connections must be emphasized between complex systemic issues and everyday needs and actions. We need greater understanding of how all these issues and perspectives work together for both long-term sustainability of human and natural systems and near-term human well-being.

Common Projects

Discussions of collaboration often lead to talk about developing shared visions and goals, and ultimately to a quest for shared projects – collective efforts that seem likely to further the missions of many partners, with benefits high enough and costs low enough so that it makes sense for each to contribute. Those interviewed often reiterated the need for time and resources set aside to support coalition building through convening, matchmaking, development of collective impact models around specific targets, and measurement of outcomes and effectiveness.

Several areas of focus for common projects were raised as topics that would yield important benefits for youth and community development as well as for environmental, conservation, and sustainability priorities:

- **Food systems:** Healthy, sustainable, equitable
- **Natural outdoor areas:** Conservation, sustainable management, and healthy, safe access
- **Health and wellness:** An overarching connector of other common concerns
- **Education:** In school and out of school
- **Local communities:** Resilience and identity
- **Reduced consumption:** Energy, materials, buildings, transportation
- **Transportation:** Affordable, equitably distributed, environmentally sustainable, low impact
- **Water management:** For healthy human use and for fisheries, biodiversity, and ecosystem health

Several of those interviewed made the point that because all these issues are highly interrelated, any environmental education issue can be addressed in ways that also lead to improvements in economic and social conditions for communities. This means that *how* environmental education issues are addressed is at least as important as *which* issues are addressed.

Recommendations

The recommendations gained from these interviews include the following:

- Environmental educators who wish to work in diverse communities should whenever possible develop long-term partnerships and help build capacity within those communities to design, modify, and lead their own culturally responsive environmental education programs. Collaborative design and leadership involving people with specific community experience, history, relationships, and expertise along with people who have environmental, conservation, or sustainability expertise is likely to lead to better outcomes on many dimensions than one-size-fits-all, prepackaged, delivered-from-outside education programs. This means that a substantial portion of funding for environmental education efforts must be dedicated to supporting local organizations and members of these communities as they develop capacity to engage with environmental issues.
- Building robust, long-term partnerships among youth/community development groups and organizations focused on environmental, conservation, and sustainability goals requires time—time that is generally not available. Most NGOs are chronically under-resourced and focus their limited budgets on core missions and operations, and perhaps on collaboration with similar groups that have closely aligned missions. Funders who wish to support environmental justice or work at the intersection of all these issues should focus substantial resources on convening, matchmaking, and cultivating these partnerships by providing funding that is dedicated to relationship building, collaboration, and common projects. Anti-collaborative pressures related to competition for recognition and funding should be reduced wherever possible.
- Both environmental educators and those who focus on youth and community development and empowerment may hold counterproductive stereotypes about each other that hinder their interest in developing partnerships and common projects. Like many stereotypes these may include some grains of truth mixed with inaccurate beliefs, overgeneralizations, and misleading expectations. Exploring and working through these assumptions and differing perspectives may help refine understandings and build focus and momentum for shared efforts.
- All groups will benefit from recognizing the need to work together. It is unlikely that most environmental education efforts will achieve success by themselves without meaningful partnerships in specific locales with specific cultural communities. Most community and youth development groups will benefit from increased capacity, through partnerships and funding, to address critical environmental education issues that affect them.
- Much more work remains to be done to overcome divisions related to race, class, language, and recency of immigration. One key way to work on these issues is to ensure that organizations have a visible, substantive, multifaceted approach to ensuring that people of different backgrounds are represented on boards, among leadership and staff, and in the design and delivery of plans, activities, publications, projects and programs. Another key avenue for bridging such divides is to provide opportunities for organizations that grew out of under-represented communities to build capacity and contribute as full partners and leaders in environmental education efforts.
- There are many suitable topics for shared, collaborative efforts that address youth and community development and empowerment goals as well as environmental, conservation, and sustainability goals. Building relationships among groups and working together on common projects can have reciprocal benefits. In other words, good relationships make developing common projects more possible, and common projects if done with care make developing good relationships more possible.

More detail on all the issues in this summary can be found in the full report.