

## Overview of National Environmental Literacy Efforts

The future of our nation, and our world, relies on a well-educated public to be knowledgeable and active stewards of the very environment that sustains us all. As an expanding global population pushes the limits of the earth's resources and ecosystems, the public will be increasingly called upon to understand complex environmental issues and how individual decisions affect the environment on a local and global scale. Yet, studies consistently reveal that the U.S. public suffers from a tremendous environmental literacy gap that appears to be *increasing* rather than decreasing.

America is in the midst of one of the most profound and rapid societal shifts in history. Today's generation of children is the first to grow up indoors and "plugged-in". Simultaneously, increased emphasis on testing has forced schools to drastically reduce or even eliminate environmental education and severely limit instructional time for science and social studies, the traditional subjects in which environmental concepts are typically addressed.

The costs of this shift are evident. Health risks of a sedentary lifestyle, such as childhood obesity, are on the rise. As youth become detached from nature they are also becoming increasingly ambivalent about the stewardship of valuable natural resources. Many students are no longer provided with the opportunity to engage in the instruction and experiences that encourage investigative inquiry and hands-on problem solving skills, which is becoming increasingly problematic as businesses recognize that many graduates lack the critical skills to address real-world challenges. Future issues relating to resource management and environmental sustainability may be inextricably linked to global economic leadership and security, yet we are at dire risk of graduating a generation of students who are fundamentally unprepared to deal with the challenges they will face on an individual, national, and global front.

Fortunately, there have been tremendous efforts in recent years to address these issues and support opportunities for the development of environmentally literate students and citizens. Many states have developed State Environmental Literacy Plans to provide a framework for school systems to expand and improve environmental education programs. Significant regional and local initiatives are also developing detailed strategies to support schools, teachers and administrators as they implement programs to achieve student environmental literacy and pursue more sustainable practices in school buildings and on school grounds. Across the country, promising efforts are under way to ensure that, as a nation, we are supporting an environmentally literate generation of effective decision-makers prepared to successfully address the complex challenges ahead.

**To learn more about environmental literacy initiatives across the country, visit:**

**North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE):**

- Environmental Literacy: <http://www.naaee.net/environmentalliteracy>
- List of State Environmental Literacy Plans: <http://www.naaee.net/environmentalliteracy/elps>
- Developing a State Environmental Literacy Plan:  
<http://eelinked.naaee.net/n/elp/posts/NAAEEs-Guide-to-Developing-a-State-Environmental-Literacy-Plan>

**No Child Left Inside (NCLI):** <http://www.cbf.org/ncli/landing>