

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE

Environmental Education Collaborative Listening Sessions Summary May 1, 2013

Background

The Environmental Education Collaborative convened more than 130 individuals in five listening sessions between March 29 and April 9, 2013. Participants included environmental education practitioners, funders, researchers, and program evaluators. The listening sessions were organized geographically and took place at Monterey Bay Aquarium, Lawrence Hall of Science, California Academy of Sciences, NatureBridge Golden Gate, and Stanford University.

The listening sessions were intended as an introductory conversation about the Environmental Education Collaborative, to explore ways to strengthen and build the field of environmental education in the greater Bay Area, and to gain insight into the most important and urgent strategies for the Environmental Education Collaborative to pursue.

Overarching Themes

Among many topics that arose from the five listening sessions, three overarching themes emerged: 1) improved messaging for environmental education, 2) diverse community engagement, and 3) innovative partnerships.

Participants cited a lack of urgency related to the value and necessity of environmental education that keeps the subject in a “nice, but not necessary” framework. At each meeting there were discussions about how environmental education can be better messaged and linked to academics, policy, and community-driven priorities. For instance, how might environmental education be woven into complementary platforms such as agriculture education, environmental justice, and public health, among others?

There was also a common theme of broader community engagement, and many cited a need for more representation among those who do not consider themselves practitioners and participants of environmental education. Participants noted the need not only for racial diversity, but also diversity of thinking and economic backgrounds.

Finally, we heard a desire for programs to be more innovative in their approach by seeking partnerships with corporations and other non-traditional partners who have an affinity for environmental education and might provide resources to help disseminate environmental education to new audiences. For example, how might we create connections between environmental education and the Silicon Valley?

Strategic Areas of Interest

In addition to the themes that emerged from the conversations, participants noted strategic areas of interest that could be pursued in partnership to strengthen environmental education in the 12-county Bay Area. The five key areas are listed below:

Marketing and strategic messaging about the value proposition, impact, and relevance of environmental education to school districts, state policy makers, funders, teachers, parents, and others—strategic messaging was also mentioned as a way to develop a shared vision and consistency within the field of environmental education itself, and align goals across programs and institutions.

Policy and advocacy on local, state, and national levels to influence the integration of environmental education into formal and informal educational settings—it was noted that environmental education, in a politicized world, is sometimes seen as a political issue. Environmental justice, urban sustainability, health, and food systems sustainability were seen as useful lenses for developing broad partnerships with clear policy and advocacy goals. In addition, participants were interested in advocating for environmental education as a way to implement the new Next Generation Science Standards and STEM initiatives in schools. Participants also mentioned advocacy and policy training.

Research and tools for evaluation to help build the case for environmental education—participants noted the desire for quantifiable research that builds the case for environmental education. Listening session attendees reported a desire for the development of shared metrics that could demonstrate the cumulative impact of environmental education, and the need for a centralized “data keeper” to identify measurable outcomes and track participation across programs and through pathways. Having a system in place to share and distill relevant research and best practices was also mentioned.

Convening and bringing people together to share resources, tools, professional development, and networking—participants stated a desire for a regional conference (quarterly or annually) for sharing ideas and resources locally, informal networking events to help build relationships and get to know other programs and professionals, and professional development for environmental educators on topics such as impact evaluation, grant writing, and current research to inform best practices. In addition to in-person convenings, participants mentioned using technological platforms to share resources and build relationships across the region. Participants also noted that several partnerships hold regular meetings (such as California Regional Environmental Education Community and the Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education), and that the Environmental Education Collaborative could build on and not duplicate these efforts.

Integrating environmental education experiences for young people by formalizing pathways from organization to organization—in addition to creating more robust experiences for participants, environmental education pathways were seen as a way to create new and more diverse partnerships, better assess longitudinal impacts, and foster meaningful collaboration between organizations. Additionally, it was noted that environmental education pathways could help with economies of scale for things like transportation and for maximizing staff, funding, and other resources.