Inclusive Environmental Education

General guidelines for encouraging and including diversity in your audience

Environmental education programs should be designed and made available for all people wishing to learn. In educating the varied audiences of environmental education, it must be acknowledged that these audiences are a mix of diverse individuals, groups and communities. Members of an audience may vary in culture, place of residence, economics, age and ability. It is important to not only recognize the diversity but to plan for and welcome it in your audiences.

Considerations for involving diverse individuals, groups and communities in environmental education are as follows…

General Guidelines

Be open, flexible and willing to learn.
- Accept that diversity awareness is only the first step to making environmental education inclusive to all Minnesotans. Awareness is not enough to bring about change; you must work to be inclusive.
- Talk to your diverse audiences and audience members, and be willing to adapt your environmental education programs to their needs.
- Research and focus on the roadblocks and barriers that inhibit an inclusive atmosphere, program or environment, and work to overcome them.
- Develop a positive regard for all students. Audiences are composed of diverse individuals, groups and communities.
- Design and modify your programs to address multiple learning styles, abilities and educational experiences.
- Look to programs that are successful. Adopt and adapt their successes into your programs.

Work to reach the diverse members of your audience.
- Increase the time needed for planning your environmental education to accommodate the time needed for research, focused promotion and varied outreach. Time is an important factor in effective education; build it in.
- In designing your environmental education, decide who your target audience is, then research who your targeted audience includes, or should include. Know your audience and the members that you may be excluding.
- Utilize focus groups representing your audiences and other organizations that serve those audiences.
- Go to where the individuals, groups or communities are that you need to include.
- Market and promote your educational offerings through media and methods used by the diverse communities you are targeting.
- Work to provide access to resources.

People tend to learn in situations where they are comfortable and secure.
- Keep the lines of communication open between you (staff and volunteers) and the people you are working to involve. Don’t be afraid to ask questions, but be aware that not everyone responds well to direct questions. Consider your audience, observe, and ask questions when appropriate.
- Provide training and resources for staff and volunteers in the various aspects of actively involving diverse individuals, groups or communities.
- Utilize community resources and resource people.
- When possible, spend time in your audience’s communities and involve yourself in their issues.
- Plan for and implement non-traditional, alternative methodologies that reach the targeted audience.
- Recognize that environmental education does not only occur in traditional school subjects. Include environmental education in situations conducive to diverse audiences.
The following five sub-sections offer suggestions for working to include diverse individuals, groups and communities of:

- Culture
- Place of Residence / Geographic Area
- Economics
- Age
- Varying Ability

Culture
The cultural representation in Minnesota is extensive and diverse. Cultural groups should not be viewed as one large cultural community because they are not. Keep in mind that within cultural communities and groups there is a range of diversity.

Welcome the opportunities to adapt and improve your environmental education programs to best serve a multitude of cultural communities.

- Involve members of cultural groups in the planning, review and delivery of educational programs and opportunities for that cultural group. Use review panels from the community to ensure that your materials are culturally appropriate and not stereotypic in nature.
- View your environmental facts and objectives through a myriad of perspectives.
- Offer new or adapted programs that consider a learning environment comfortable to the targeted group, such as family programming.
- Be willing to try, to accept responsibility for mistakes and to resolve to improve them.

Language may be a barrier and should be addressed beforehand.

- In order to make information readily available; provide signage in specific languages in the different markets, grocery stores, community centers, schools, restaurants, and recreational sites.
- Provide resources, such as brochures and flyers, in appropriate languages.
- Work with a diversity of education organizations or centers familiar to the community to include environmental education.
- Market and communicate through a variety of media, especially established systems, and key people who work with various ethnic groups.
- Provide interpreters and leaders from within a cultural group to help with language and other cultural means of communication.

Cultural norms must be taken into account.

- Provide more extensive learning styles, cross-cultural communication, diversity, and sensitivity training for staff and volunteers.
- Recognize the needs and contributions of different cultural groups, including the cultural heritage, traditions, and values.
- Acknowledge the norms of the cultural community such as gender, age, apparel, and accepted activities. Take them into consideration in planning your programs.
- Learn and be respectful of religious holidays, service days, and other major community gatherings, when scheduling your events.

Marketing or communicating EE programs is vital to welcoming diverse groups.

- Develop and deliver accurate, non-stereotypic programs and materials for specific cultural groups as well as for the public-at-large.
- Integrate educational programs into cultural celebrations and events or other major events for cultural and ethnic communities.
Place of Residence / Geographic Area
It cannot be assumed that all individuals in your audiences are from similar geographic areas or places of residence. These may range from urban neighborhoods to remote rural communities, from single family units to multi-family dwellings. Understanding the relationship between people and their built environment in urban areas is as important in environmental education as understanding the ecology of the natural environment.

Acknowledge that all environments are important and relevant.
- Concentrate on the commonalities of the environments while educating on the differences.
- In using examples and case studies, be sure to cite a variety of geographic locations so that all audience members may relate to them.
- Research the environmental subjects most relevant to the targeted audience through pre-assessments, surveys, interviews or any method that will give you the necessary information. Direct your education to their concerns.

Urban and rural environmental issues need to be taught.
- Recognize that those living and/or working in a city deem the urban and built environment as important, if not more so, than the natural environment.
- Include urban environmental topics and issues in your environmental education.
- Be sensitive to the knowledge that people may use their environment as their livelihood, not only as a place to reside.
- Incorporating sustainability issues in your environmental education may help your audience members relate the learning to their own places of residence.

Work to make your environmental education accessible.
- Take into account that your audience members may not be comfortable in unfamiliar settings. Prepare them with logistics and necessary information before the event.
- Consider the location of your program. Vary the locations to involve more diversity and choose sites that are accessible to people not familiar with the area.

Economic Factors
One diversifying factor that needs to be addressed is economics. It cannot be denied that the economic concerns or conditions of your audience members may affect their involvement in environmental education programs. This area is a sensitive one. Work to involve all interested individuals, groups and communities.

Direct and indirect costs associated with your program may limit your audience makeup.
- If there are supplemental funds to cover the expenses for those unable to pay, relate that information in a sensitive, responsible manner.
- Consider transportation constraints that members of your audience may have. How accessible is your program location to those without vehicles?
- Provide the materials necessary for your environmental education programs. Do not ask your audience to bring them.
- Offer appropriate incentives to encourage involvement.
- If working with a community, establish support through sponsorships.

Make your environmental education relevant to the priorities of your audience. Research what their priority concerns are and build your program accordingly.
- Integrate your environmental education into other learning situations and opportunities.
- Work with agencies, groups, and organizations that are already familiar to the audience members you are trying to reach.
- Environmental justice concerns should be included and addressed when working with economically challenged groups.
- Remember that access to information is empowering. Don’t assume that everyone has equal access to resources. Help make resources available to all your audience members.
Consider the time of day your environmental education programs are available. Is this conducive to involving the audience you need to include?

**Age**
Environmental education is not exclusively for K-12 students. Its audiences consist of individuals in age spanning pre-kindergarten toddlers to experienced seniors. To take advantage of this wealth of experiences, promote and direct your programs to the appropriate audience.

Vary your teaching styles according to the age of your audiences and their involvement.
- Use age appropriate language, examples and facts in your programs. In working with youth, use appropriate learning levels.
- Gear your programs to be participatory as adults expect to be active in directing their learning.

**Capitalize on the experience of your audience members.**
- Acknowledge that the incentives for learning can vary greatly upon age. Develop and adapt your programs to encourage diverse members to participate.
- Appreciate the value of mentors and work to build connections of diverse age groups through mentoring networks.
- Although educating students in organized settings often seems to be the focus of environmental educators, take into account that the largest number of volunteers are over the age of fifty. Take advantage of that interest and help them engage themselves in environmental education.

**Varying Ability**
While working to include individuals and groups with varied abilities in your audience, keep foremost in your mind to recognize the person first and the disability second by focusing on abilities rather than disabilities and commonalities rather than differences.

Proper planning and access to supporting resources will help you provide an inviting, effective learning environment.
- Include social and cooperative goals that facilitate appreciation of differing abilities.
- Make programs as participatory as possible for all individuals.
- In marketing or promoting your environmental education program, be clear in your communications of services available, facilities, and your desire to accommodate needs.
- Work to ensure accessibility for all members of your audience.
- Be aware of resources in the community that can help you and your audience.
- Incorporate adaptations such as: materials, procedures / rules, skill sequences, environmental modifications and lead-up activities.
- Research appropriate behaviors and considerations for the particular disability.

Attitudes or behaviors can promote an atmosphere of acceptance and possibilities rather than restrictions.
- Focus on the individual’s ability rather than the disability.
- Keep in mind that people with disabilities are more similar than dissimilar.
- Strive to appreciate and understand personality as well as the disabling condition.
- Remember that everyone appreciates being listened and spoken to in a manner that is respectful, direct and clear.
- Present opportunities for learning that correspond to the chronological age of the individual.
- Always address the person first and the disability second. It is a more positive approach to address the individual as a person with a disability rather than as a disabled person.
- Set a good example as others in the group emulate the leader.

* The tips in the Varying Abilities section are taken from the Vinland Inclusion Project’s guide, *Access to Opportunities.*