Kids Planning Our Environment: Environmental Education as a Tool for Community Stewardship

Erica M. Clark

Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Urban and Regional Planning in Urban Affairs and Planning

JoAnn Carmin, Chair
Jesse Richardson
Dana Raines

April 9, 2002
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: environmental education, environmental planning, stewardship, curriculum, child-initiated

Copyright 2002, Erica M. Clark
Kids Planning Our Environment: Environmental Education as a Tool for Community Stewardship

Erica M. Clark

(ABSTRACT)

A constant in all planning activities is interaction among stakeholders. Despite the involvement of many stakeholder groups, one faction is consistently overlooked in planning decisions: children. In the push to make decisions and consider the numerous viewpoints of the adult population, children are habitually left by the wayside. Planners all too often fail to acknowledge that local children may have insightful and creative ideas to address issues. This is particularly true when these issues affect local children, as is often the case with environmental planning decisions. How can planners incorporate children in the practice of environmental planning?

Environmental education provides a unique approach through which planners can integrate children’s ideas. This approach can be directed toward youth-initiated venues for bringing environmental planning into the classroom. By blending environmental education with the structure of a classroom setting, we can create a mutually beneficial setting where children’s unique perspectives can be nurtured.

By using environmental education to create a basis of knowledge about local issues and to provide a forum for children’s participation, their ideas can be incorporated into planning. The following chapters discuss the importance of including children in environmental planning as well as how to use environmental education as an approach toward this end. Three case studies illustrate how programs in the United States are challenging youth to become active stewards of their local environments. Although environmental education can be utilized for children of all ages as well as adults, this paper focuses on grades four through nine.

The unique perspective and dynamic that children possess is often undermined and overlooked. The benefits of involving children are numerous. They can provide creative insight, learn decision-making skills, and become stewards of their local environment. There are also challenges to involving children. Forefront among these challenges is that utilizing a child-initiated forum often requires more time from planners. By providing background education and a familiar forum for children, educators and planners could overcome traditional barriers to incorporating child-initiated planning.