From Mud Puddle to Town Treasure: Wetlands Estonoa Saved by Saint Paul Senior Ecology Class

Just a three-minute walk from the high school in St. Paul, Virginia, sits a wetlands no larger than an acre that has captured the attention of its town and its state. Saved from certain ruin, Wetlands Estonoa (Native American for “land of the blue waters”) is the centerpiece of a town, the pride and joy of a handful of students and their school, and a noble justification for outdoor, science and place-based education, that has come to the attention of the state’s governor and national environmental organizations.

What some wanted to make into a parking lot, and others used as the unofficial town dumping ground is now a certified wetlands and town park, complete with picnic tables, gravel path and bridges, bat boxes and aquatic vegetation plantings. All of this happened this year, thanks to students in Terry Vencil’s senior Physics and Appalachian Ecology classes, with help from local business owners and townspeople.

It has been just one year since this project was made public, and in that year, the students have accomplished much more than physical beautification of the wetlands. This year the group has presented their project to many organizations from local Lions clubs to the Governor’s Forum on Environmental Education. They raised funds and wrote grant proposals, soliciting both in-kind and financial donations. They worked with the Nature Conservancy to develop news releases and learned more about writing grant requests. They developed partnerships with local colleges, including Virginia Tech and Ferrum College, and also with Job Corps. In the midst of all of this, they somehow managed to form friendships that will last a lifetime: “We’re a family,” says student Kassi Brooks.

From Humble Beginnings…

It all started a short two years ago, when student Stevie Sabo chose the wetlands as his Appalachian Ecology class project. Sabo found that the area had once been a pristine, man-made lake, formed when two brothers dammed the...
October 11–13, 2001

Speaking with One Voice: A Conference on Education and the Environment of the Chautauqua-Allegheny Region

Roger Tory Peterson Institute and Jamestown Community College, Jamestown, New York

This conference aims to engage teachers, school administrators and community members in a vision for the future in which the natural world is key to a region’s educational, as well as ecological wellbeing. Keynote presenters and a panel discussion will feature regional and national experts on place-based education who will make the connection between educating children for ecological literacy and meeting the learning standards to which schools are held accountable.

The registration fee is $160 and does not include board. Register by September 27. Call (800) 758-6841 or e-mail 2001conference@rtpi.org for more information.

October 11–15, 2001

2001: An EE Odyssey—Exploring Capacity, Complexity and Culture

North American Association for Environmental Education’s 30th Annual Conference, Little Rock, Arkansas

The conference will be built around four strands: 1) capacity: efforts to create sustainable EE organizations, leaders and programs; 2) community: working with community-based programs; 3) complexity: understanding the intricate ties that bind all together in the living systems of the globe; and 4) culture: working within the cultural context of different communities.


October 24–27, 2001

Rural Education—Celebrating Diversity

The 93rd Annual National Rural Education Association (NREA) Convention, Albuquerque Marriott Hotel, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Topics to be discussed include: addressing cultural discontinuity via curriculum; inclusive school initiatives; place-based education; rural school reform models; teaching methods for diverse populations; and more. Dr. Oscar Kawagley, co-director of the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (a Rural Trust network site) will be a keynote speaker at the kick-off banquet.

Make room reservations at 1-800-228-9290. For more information, contact NREA headquarters in Colorado at (970) 491-7022 or go to their website at www.colostate.edu/orgs/NREA/.

October 28–30, 2001

Rural Trust Midwest (Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota) Regional Meeting

Benedict Center, Schuyler, Nebraska

Contact Barbara Poore at (712) 526-2044, or by e-mail at barbara.poore@ruraledu.org.

November 4–5, 2001

23rd Annual Rural and Small School Conference

Presented by the Center for Rural Education & Small Schools, and the College of Education at Kansas State University, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas

Presentations will highlight current research or exemplary programs involving rural education. Emphasis on leadership, technology, school-to-work, standards-based education, and practices that enhance classroom learning, increased achievement, address cultural and language diversity and promote connectivity with the community. For more information, go to http://www2.educ.ksu.edu/organizations/cress/ or contact Barbara Havlicek at (785) 532-5886, e-mail barbhav@ksu.edu.
New Grants Build on Annenberg Funding

In 1995, the Annenberg Rural Challenge set out to find, and then fund, high-quality place-based education efforts going on around the country. Six years later, Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) network sites in 35 states routinely perceive that the Annenberg funding has “opened doors.” The sites have found that their programs receive more support from the community. Their ability to expand upon the programs already in place has improved. Most importantly, program funding has continued through new relationships with grant-making organizations. Three recent grants to Rural Trust network sites in South Dakota, Nebraska and Pennsylvania demonstrate that involvement with the Rural Trust can lead to bigger things.

Community Revitalization in South Dakota

In February, the Miner County Community Revitalization (MCCR) signed a 10-year partnership agreement with the Northwest Area Foundation (NAF), a regional philanthropy dedicated to reducing poverty.

MCCR was the first organization of an estimated 16 other communities to be approved for the NAF “Community Ventures” program; MCCR will receive $5.8 million over ten years. Funds will be used to implement the community plan and vision developed by more than 100 residents of Miner County. The plan is aimed at reducing poverty, stabilizing the population, and developing the local economy through collaboration and sharing by those who live or work in Miner County.

Randy Parry, MCCR’s Executive Director, believes that the impetus for community change began with the involvement of the schools with the Rural Challenge: “If it weren’t for the Challenge, we wouldn’t be where we are today. By first involving people in the educational process, they were able to see that they really could evolve and make a better life for all of those living in the county—through their own work.”

Small Business Creation in Nebraska and South Dakota

Two Rural Challenge sites—School at the Center in Nebraska and Black Hills Special Services Cooperative in South Dakota—realized early on that they shared very similar economic and cultural conditions, and that working together made sense. It was with this understanding that Jerry Hoffman of School at the Center and Curt Shaw of Black Hills began their collaboration on the first Student Extravaganza in 1995. The relationship between the two organizations has now matured into an enduring joint venture, as they continue to pool their resources in order to identify young people as contributors to the sustainability of their communities.

They are now in the second year of their newest project together—a three-year, $147,000 grant from the Hitachi Foundation to engage rural youth in small business creation and entrepreneurial training. Their youth entrepreneurship program hopes to stem the population drain afflicting the two states’ rural communities, a problem often attributed to a lack of economic opportunities. “The Hitachi grant is bringing the regional collaboration that started with the Rural Challenge to the next level,” said Hoffman.

This year, the program will engage rural youth in four South Dakota and two Nebraska communities in small business creation; the goal is to reach 10 communities in each state by the end of the three years. Shaw starts with each group by conducting “Entrepreneur Institutes”.

New Board Executive Committee Named

Johnson Joins Rural Trust Board of Trustees

Leroy Johnson, Executive Director of Southern Echo, Inc., was elected to the Rural Trust’s Board of Trustees at its June meeting. Johnson brings to the Board his extensive experience in community grassroots organizing, training and youth leadership development. While at Southern Echo, he has developed a community-based conflict resolution training program; created the Mississippi Education Working Group, a collaboration of parents around the state pushing for an equal and high-quality public education system; and worked to strengthen the state’s legislative black caucus.

Arthur Campbell, Vice President, Economic Development with the Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta was named Chair; John Zeglis, President, AT&T and Chairman & CEO, AT&T Wireless remained Vice Chair; Linda Martin, Education Coordinator for Challenge West Virginia was named Secretary; and Mollie Hale Carter, Vice President of Star A. Inc. became Treasurer.

continued on page 11
Murrah Reflects on Six Years of Rural Trust

Communications Director Kathy Westra interviewed Jack Murrah, President of the Lyndhurst Foundation and founding chair of the Rural Trust’s Board of Trustees, on June 29, just after Murrah completed his final board meeting as chair. In the interview, Murrah reflected on his years of involvement—from the Trust’s beginnings as the Annenberg Rural Challenge, to its current incarnation as the Rural School and Community Trust.

KW: Back in the beginning, the Annenberg Foundation hadn’t really thought about rural schools. You were instrumental in changing that thinking. How did you make the case, and why did you think it was so important?

The Annenberg Challenge was announced to the world at the end of ’94. At that time, there wasn’t any mention of what the focus would be, whether it would be urban or rural or regional or whatever, so it seemed a fairly open-ended opportunity. I simply wrote a letter to the foundation saying that there was an interesting stream of work that the Lyndhurst Foundation had been associated with for 7–10 years down in Alabama [the PACERS program], to which we had made a significant commitment for the next five years. And I said if they were looking for financial partners—partners with some experience in specific communities around the country—that we would be very interested in having a conversation with them.

Following the initial announcement, a further [one] was made that [the Challenge was] going to focus on the large cities—urban districts that were places of maybe the greatest challenge for the success of public education. To be honest with you, I assumed that meant that they wouldn’t be inviting me back.

KW: But we know now that they did.

Yes, sometime in the summer of 1995 I got a call from Barbara Cervone, the person coordinating this initiative at Brown University, who said she had gone through some 2,000 letters [from people interested in being part of the Annenberg Challenge], and that there had been two letters that spoke of work in rural places that caught her eye. One of them was my letter. And it had made her think about whether or not the Challenge ought to be thinking about work in rural America. She asked me if I would come to a meeting to talk about it. And about a dozen people met to talk about a national rural initiative that would address the needs and opportunities in rural America—that broad spectrum of the nation that was largely invisible to the national press. We talked about [how it] would require a different kind of effort than could be made in a concentrated urban place.

KW: Was it a hard sell? Was “rural” just so far off people’s screens that they needed convincing? Obviously, you made a good case….

I think Barbara was sympathetic to the issue the moment that she heard it. I can’t account for that, but it appeared to me that she had already decided that if there was a way to craft a credible initiative, that she would be willing to be an advocate for it. The other people around the table were all able to speak to the existence of good work that was going on. I think the big issue in some ways was: “Is there enough here that you can build upon? Is there enough work that has coherence, or [a] philosophical, definable character that you could say this is going to be an initiative rather than simply a wild throw of darts at a large national map?”

KW: What were the biggest challenges of this time?

There was a profoundly unsettled issue that I think probably cast a long shadow over the early years of the Rural Challenge. The planning committee was coming up with exemplars of rural work—rural initiatives that ought to be the initial participants in the Annenberg rural program. I think there were 14 initiatives. They included everything from a graduate school of English that focuses on preparing individual teachers to teach writing effectively in rural settings (the Bread Loaf School of English), to the PACERS program, which is engaged in whole-school change, and specifically [working on] efforts to reconnect the schools to the life of the community. So these were both narrowly and broadly gauged initiatives, but they were identified as exemplars, and as the initial founding participants in the Rural Challenge.

KW: So not everyone agreed on this approach?

Well, it was a major philosophical struggle we had early on. Should we concentrate the initiative and the resources behind it on the already identified exemplars and try to take them to a place of significantly greater stature, quality of work, scope of work, etc.?

Another school of thought was that these initial exemplars were merely spots on the ground from which we could build, and [we had] to do an exhaustive search for other interested parties who could bring more children into the benefit of this initiative. Those were some of the early tensions over what the scope of the work was, what
August 2001

The Rural School and Community Trust

Rural Roots

important achievement.

KW: When you succeeded in getting Annenberg support—to the tune of a challenge grant for $50 million—what were your thoughts about raising an equal amount and then spending so much money in just five years? Wasn’t that an absolutely daunting challenge?

If there’s a word that exceeds “daunting,” put it in! It was incredibly challenging for us to imagine how we would secure the match and how we would use the resources in a responsible way, because it was a really short time. There were no other dollars committed to this work, and very few donors that we knew of who were willing to put other dollars on the table.

KW: My recollection is that the Lyndhurst Foundation, through your good offices, put some money on the table in the form of a loan so things could get started.

We provided a loan simply to establish an operation, because we had no resources with which to hire a director or establish an office or do any of the initial steps that had to be taken before we could mobilize a rural initiative. Yes, we did that. And then the Annenberg Foundation did a very helpful thing when they said that we could use money that had been raised in the last year by those 14 initial partners as a kind of dowry that they would accept as money that had been put up to match the Ambassador’s gift.

KW: So, a lot of the matching money was raised in these small communities?

Yes, and that turned out to be one of the most positive things. Even if we had been able to raise $50 million in grants from large foundations around the country, in the long run it would have left communities with a greater sense of dependency and less sense of how to sustain their work than they have today. The good of it is that I think we did build a relationship with and inspire habits and dispositions in communities that leave them better prepared to keep their work going forward. And that’s a really important achievement.

KW: Talk to me a little bit about “hard places”—rural places of great need that could benefit from support and place-based education programs.

I think that our work in “hard places” will be the biggest payoff in the long run. Those are the places where this kind of education could be of extraordinary value, but we knew we could not simply find it and support it. We would have to help people get to it, and we would have to start with where they were—

“I would not have been as ardent in my efforts to make this initiative successful unless I profoundly believed that we have a set of principles at work that are sound and are consistent with moral values, political values, and beliefs about community and democracy.”

KW: What has been the most inspiring part of this work for you?

Some people always answer that question with something that talks about people—human beings that inspired you and helped you get up in the morning and try again. Then there’s another kind of answer that focuses on the inspirational quality of the ideals—the ideas themselves.

I’m the kind of person who has to say both those things. I would not have been as ardent in my efforts to make this initiative successful unless I profoundly believed that we have a set of principles at work that are sound and are consistent with moral values, political values, and beliefs about community and democracy. Those big words are important to me. I am driven by a commitment to value-laden principles. But that alone isn’t enough unless you see that it’s real, and where it gets real is in specific places. My inspiration comes from seeing good people do good work inspired by good principles.

KW: So what’s been the most difficult thing?

It was a real mental challenge for me to grasp and begin to articulate the scope and depth of what this work is about. I went there willingly, but it was with difficulty that I mastered the conceptual level of our work. The things that have been hard that are memorable are the things that are about getting to the richness of this kind of work.

KW: You’ve convinced the Lyndhurst Foundation to commit an extraordinary amount of money to the Rural Trust to support its future work. How do you see that investment “paying off” for rural schools through the work of the Trust?

I hope that every year, as we go forward, there are more schools and communities that see themselves as a part of the Rural School and Community Trust, doing work that they have undertaken with a sense that it is connected to a larger body of work across the country—a network of school and community reform. The second piece is for every place, every year, to feel that they are doing the work better than they were before. That the skills in the community, among the civic and political leadership, the skills in the schools, among the teachers, and the skills particularly among the students have grown an inch or two. That they themselves [the sites] have a deeper understanding of what it is that they are about. That they acquired the skill and the disposition to take stock honestly of how they are doing, and set a target for the next year to do more.
main water source of their cornfield to create a swimming hole. The lake became the center of town activity, not only used for swimming, but for fishing and even baptisms. Over the years, the lake filled in with dirt, debris and trash, and Sabo believed that the lake should be restored to its original glory. The following year, student Nikki Buffalow adopted the project. It was she who realized the lake could not be returned to its former form, because the area had turned into wetlands, a land-type that could be protected through U.S. law.

So started this unique project in Vencil’s student-led class—a class offered as the fifth day of a weeklong physics course during first semester and a full-time class for second semester. As student Sarah Baca put it: “I thought it was a great way of getting out of a day of physics…but it turned out to be much more than that.” Students ended up putting in—voluntarily—15–20 hours a week on the project, devoting many weekend and evening hours to learning and working on Estonoa.

Wetlands Estonoa
from page 1

A Distinctive Classroom Experience

At the group’s presentation given at the Rural Trust’s Appalachian Regional Conference, Vencil asks her students, “Who runs this Appalachian Ecology class?” There is a resounding, “We do!” as students joyfully answer.

The class got their feet wet, quite literally, with place-based learning when they started examining nearby Lick Creek, a water source to the Clinch River, using SOS (Save our Streams) and GLOBE (Global Learning and Observations for the Environment) monitoring systems. SOS is a way of evaluating a stream’s quality by calculating the number and kinds of macroinvertebrates in the stream. “It’s really fun—you get to get in the creek and look for little macroinvertebrates and wear these big, clunky waders,” said Rudder.

GLOBE allows more than 10,000 students, teachers and scientists from all over the world to network and share data with each other. In May of this year, St. Paul High School became GLOBE certified, after the Appalachian Ecology students and science teachers took GLOBE-sponsored Saturday training workshops that covered water quality, land coverage, atmosphere and soil. The students also took Saturday field trips in their area that reflected their classmates’ interests and projects, including spelunking, water treatment and

“Everyone finds something in the class that they truly love that they can concentrate on.”

—TERRY VENCIL
nic tables, and started to thin the lily pads that are so thick, they deplete the water’s oxygen supply, making life difficult for fish. Reluctant to use pesticides, the students are having trouble coming up with an environmentally safe way to thin those lily pads short of getting into the water themselves and pulling them out by hand. They confronted a similar problem when poison ivy began sprouting up around the water. To avoid using harmful chemicals, they plan to enlist the help of a couple of goats.

Just in the beginning stages, the third phase of their plan is the building of a two-story learning center on the land next to Estonoa. Students at the Virginia Tech School of Architecture presented three designs of the proposed educational facility that would store learning materials, provide classroom space and have an observation deck. They plan on using solar panels and other environmentally friendly building products as a means of continuing their commitment to the environment. The students hope the learning center will be used to teach classes to younger grade levels, host a summer camp and conduct on-site research.

More Than a Science Class

While working to improve the wetlands, the students have dealt with changing the town’s attitudes, working with other class levels within the school, writing grants, obtaining land easements, forming a governing board and working with the town council. They created many “scrapbooks” or portfolios that document every single move they have made, including a media and contact directory, their budget and monetary plans, grant requests, student reflections and photos, presentations, and legal papers. This class entitled “Appalachian Ecology” is much more than that. The students have worked on legal, political and social issues, all while concentrating on biological improvements.

“There are not many classes that teach social interaction. These kids have had to deal with people who live around the area—people who for years were dump-trashing trash in the lake. You can’t just go up and knock on their door and say, ‘You can’t do that.’ You have to figure some way to socially schmooze them a bit,” said Vencil. She told a local newspaper, “They don’t mind doing it. One of their mottos is, ‘Be friendly, keep smiling and stay in their faces.’”

‘Stay in their faces’ is an understatement. The students have presented their project dozens of times to community organizations, the town council and nonprofit national meetings. One of their more high-profile presentations was to the Governor’s Forum on Environmental Education. As the only student presenters at the conference, “we blew everybody away,” said Rudder. “We were the only organized group there, and the only group with a PowerPoint [presentation].” It’s the students’ superior skills, such as mastering computer software, and their mature attitudes that get people’s attention—and money.

The class raised thousands of dollars, with donations or grants from local churches, the county Board of Supervisors, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the state’s environmental endowment. In-kind donations have included plants and volunteer time (from people like TVA biologist Doug Lieb and Ferrum College students).

The Benefits of Team-Based Work

The experience of working with Estonoa has allowed many students to recognize and highlight their unique gifts and contributions. Each student has an area to concentrate on, from directing the GLOBE program to managing publications. “Everyone finds something in the class that they truly love that they can concentrate on. This class works for all kids because [they’re] given the opportunity to do what they want and do it well. They’re treated as if they have worth and what they say has worth,” said Vencil.

C.C. Fields, a student organizer with the project, realized his career goals while working on Estonoa. “Working on this project pointed me in the right direction. I realized that I want to pursue forestry and work outdoors,” he said.

For other students, working on the project has helped them gain self-confidence and pride. “I’ve always been worried coming from a small school, that when I got to college, I would be kind of blown away by my peers who have had all these AP courses and all that stuff—opportunities that I haven’t had. I figured I would just flounder. But, now I feel as prepared as anybody, because, I mean, how many people do you know that know how to write a grant? How many teenagers do you know that have presented to all these people and done all of these things?” said Rudder, the public relations and PowerPoint manager.

Saying Goodbye

The students have put a lot of time and effort into the planning of the future community learning center. But, that project and others will have to be passed on to next year’s Appalachian Ecology class. This year’s senior students have put so much of themselves into this project, they are having a lot of trouble handing it over. “I’ve fallen in love with this project…giving it up is going to be awful,” said Baca. And Vencil tears up thinking about it: “I’m hating for [them] to give it up.” For now, the class of 2001 will have to be content with single-handedly developing an old, forgotten “mud puddle” into the treasure of an entire town and community.
How to Make the Outdoors Your Classroom

Today’s children spend very little time outdoors. At home, television and video games often take the place of pick-up softball games and afternoon bike rides. And at school, teachers are sometimes wary of taking their class outside for a variety of reasons. Yet, research shows that outdoor education helps students to develop leadership qualities, foster a sense of place, improve learning through direct, first-hand experiences and improve overall achievement. (See Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning by G. Lieberman, available through www.ael.org/eric.)

Acknowledging that, teachers then face a broad spectrum of questions: “Where would we go? How do I keep control of the class? How do I work this into the curriculum?” Fortunately, a wealth of resources are available for the teacher interested in making outdoor learning a part of his/her everyday curriculum.

Spaces for Learning

As demonstrated with the crew from St. Paul High School and their Wetlands Estonoa project, school grounds (or land close to the school) can be incredible learning spaces. “Every school’s grounds are potential educational spaces where concepts taught within the school building can come alive to students,” writes Cheryl Wagner in the pamphlet Planning School Grounds for Outdoor Learning available from the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (www.edfacilities.org).

Having trouble thinking of ways of learning outside within school grounds? In Five Minute Field Trips, authors Sue Arlidge and Gareth Thomson list over 30 activities for teaching about nature on school grounds for grades 1–6 (call (780) 447-9400 to order).

Another useful resource is Greening School Grounds: Creating Habitats for Learning available from Green Teacher Magazine. It includes dozens of activity ideas from past magazine articles with step-by-step instructions. Some areas covered include butterfly gardens, pond and prairie restoration and school composting (www.greenteacher.com).

Although incorporating outdoor learning into your curriculum is perhaps easiest on school grounds, other location options are limitless. For instance, time spent walking around your town and your town’s landmarks, businesses, homes, roads and shops can contribute much to your curriculum, be it science, art, history or English. Local parks, outdoor learning centers and rivers or other water sources are also valuable learning spaces that can span subject areas.

The biggest step is deciding to move your class outside. Where you decide to go is less important than what you choose to do with the precious time spent outdoors and how you integrate it into your curriculum.

A Part of the Curriculum—Resources

“While wetlands and other natural areas may be environmentally beneficial in general, on school grounds their true value emerges only through their integration into the school’s overall educational program,” writes Wagner.

Websites to check out for curriculum ideas:

- The National Wildlife Federation’s Schoolyard Habitat Program provides a kit for converting your grounds into natural habitats, specific curriculum ideas, and a listserv to converse with the nearly 1,500 other schools involved in this effort: www.nwf.org/habitats/schoolyard/index.html.
- The Environmental Protection Agency provides teachers with an online environmental education center that lists curriculum and community service ideas, and grant information at: www.epa.gov/teachers/.
- The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) sponsors www.eelink.net, a website that provides classroom resources, professional resources specifically for teachers, and grant information.
- The Center for Environmental Education lists a tremendous number of educational resources, curriculum ideas and activities at: www.cee-ane.org.
- The National Gardening Association’s www.kidsgardening.com has school greenhouse guidelines, a teacher’s resources “room,” grant updates and a school garden registry that includes more than 1,000 schools with which to network.

These sites focus mostly on science and environmental education. However, it is important to note that other curriculum areas can benefit from time spent outdoors, or can be piggybacked onto learning going on in other classes or subject matters. For instance, a class trip to woodlands in your area will incorporate science (identifying trees or animal tracks and discussing environmental sustainability), English (students reflect upon their experiences or write a story based on what they learned), art (students draw or paint what they see while on location,
perhaps to help identify local plant, bird or insect species), math (students calculate tree heights), and more.

Some books to check out, available through your local or online bookstores unless otherwise noted:

In Accord with Nature: Helping Students Form an Environmental Ethic Using Outdoor Experience and Reflection, by Clifford E. Knapp demonstrates how educators can help middle-school age and higher level students understand and define their relationship to nature and learn the importance of protecting the environment. Knapp provides alternative teaching strategies and structured activities to help connect students with their world. To order, call AEL at (800) 624-9120 or email aelinfo@ael.org. The book is $19.

Natural Learning: Creating Environments for Rediscovering Nature’s Way of Teaching, by Robin C. Moore and Herbert H. Wong is based on ten years of research and community development. It illustrates how to create a child-centered educational institution based on community participation, environmental education and ecosystem health. Learn how to naturalize your schoolyard and transform it into an outdoor classroom. Find endless and innovative ways to teach the basics and expand your curriculum into outdoor settings. The book is $29.95.

Taking Inquiry Outdoors: Reading, Writing, and Science Beyond the Classroom Walls by Barbara Bourne for $17, was published in 1999.

Teaching in the Outdoors by Donald, William and Elizabeth Hammerman is $32.95. Most recently published in 2001 and first published in the 1970s, this book is a good rationale of outdoor education and includes techniques and procedures.

Tips for Taking Kids Outdoors

Green Teacher Magazine’s most recent issue has an article by Nalani McCutcheon and Andrea Swanson entitled Tips and Tricks for Taking Kids Outdoors with some great ideas to help teachers who fear teaching outdoors. The following is just a sampling of some suggestions by the two authors. For the full article and more tips go to www.greenteacher.com for ordering information; the article is in Issue 64, Spring 2001.

Plan the logistics. Plan on allowing students to take turns leading group walks or activities. Provide opportunities to run and be active. Give specific assignments to help focus the group’s attention. Evaluate your time together when you return and discuss what went well and what didn’t—to better plan for the next trip outside.

Be flexible. “The turkey vulture soaring overhead or the rabbit running across the trail may interrupt your lesson, but accept that it is a natural attention magnet for students…” They are the moments your students will likely never forget, and if you can bridge these spontaneous events to the lesson at hand, you will likely cement the learning,” write the authors. Although it’s important to plan ahead and have a lesson plan in mind, never ignore those learning opportunities that can happen when outdoors.

Empower yourself. “Just as an athlete takes time to practice on a new field before a competition, so too must teachers take time to establish a personal comfort with the new learning environment,” write McCutcheon and Swanson. Part of planning ahead is visiting the place you intend to take your students beforehand, and thinking through your lesson structure, class size, or what additional help you will need.

Your Comfort Level is Defined by You

With enough planning and trust in yourself and your students, your outdoor education lessons will be extremely rewarding. A final reminder from the authors of the Green Teacher article says it all: “Remember that your level of comfort is not built by your classroom walls, it is built within your mind.

Outdoor Education

“Outdoor Education means learning in and for the out-of-doors. It is a means of curriculum extension and enrichment through outdoor experiences. It is not a separate discipline with prescribed objectives, like science and mathematics. It is simply a learning climate offering opportunities for direct laboratory experiences in identifying and resolving real-life problems, for acquiring skills with which to enjoy a lifetime of creative living, for building concepts and developing concern about man and his natural environment and for getting us back in touch with those aspects of living where our roots were once firm and deep.”

—Smith, Carleson, Masters and Davidson, Outdoor Education
Spanning Cultures and Miles: A Teacher’s First Person Account of the Zia Pueblo and Peacham, Vermont Student Exchange

by Cathy Browne, Teacher at Peacham Elementary School in Peacham, Vermont

Several thousand miles and the visible differences of culture and geography separate the two small communities of Zia Pueblo, New Mexico and Peacham, Vermont. Elementary and middle school students from both villages recently encountered firsthand their contrasting ways of life, while simultaneously learning about the important values and experiences that they both share.

Four students and two teachers from the Peacham Elementary School visited the Zia Pueblo School in March of 2000 through a grant from the Vermont Rural Partnership, a group of 18 small Vermont schools funded primarily through the Rural School and Community Trust. Hosted by families living on the pueblo, they were treated to warm welcoming ceremonies at the school, tours of the pueblo by members of the tribal council, and field trips to the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in neighboring Albuquerque.

Much was learned about the culture by the more formal introductions to the village, but both children and adults were most deeply affected by the warmth of the host families and their openness while sharing their culture. The students immediately felt at home, as one student remarked: “I felt like they already knew me—I had friends right away!” and another stated, “I felt really comfortable, like I was staying over at a friend’s house.” They particularly enjoyed the commonalities found on the basketball court, the ice-breaker for the students at recess within an hour of arrival.

Scenes such as this immediately reinforced the reflections voiced by all the students at the end of their visit that, “they’re just like us, they do the same things and play the same games.” But the students also were deeply aware of the importance of culture and tradition in the Zia community. They noted that the ways they celebrate holidays and their traditional dances were quite different than in Vermont.

One student noted: “We should have our own artwork or pottery like they do, for example with a hermit thrush (the Vermont state bird).” For the two adults, including myself, it became very important to consider how we would share the Peacham culture with the Zia children when they came to visit Peacham the following year. We asked ourselves, “How can we define the Vermont culture? What makes it unique?”

In May of 2001 we were given the opportunity to reciprocate the Zia families’ generosity. The Zia School’s sixth grade teacher, Tina Aragon, organized a memorable trip for her sixth grade class of nine students, funded through the Rural Trust, and Futures for Children, a nonprofit group that supports Native American children.

The Peacham students were quite excited to be seeing their friends again. As one of the students who visited New Mexico said, “I was glad that my old friends could come over and I could see them again, because I was afraid I wouldn’t. I was really happy that they could make it.” The Peacham students and their parents were eager to share their lives and surroundings with the Zia students, and together they presented a
rich, local heritage to their visitors. Together, they made maple candy, visited local ponds and forests, and looked for deer tracks. They visited a local dairy farm, and took field trips to meet the Governor of Vermont and to taste Ben and Jerry’s ice cream.

The visit also helped to tangibly share the powerful connections made in the original visit by a small segment of the school population with a wider section of the Peacham community. One student who hosted two of the boys stated:

“I learned a lot about their culture. I learned how they respected things differently than we do. Like they consider rocks as weapons, and we just consider them as rocks. They don’t use them and they don’t throw them at anybody, unless they’re going to kill an animal…We saw a lot of turkeys and they chased the turkeys around the field. They make their houses out of mud, out of adobe, probably because they have a good supply of it out there. They like the thick forests and the green grass we have.

Another girl mentioned the similarities and differences that the Peacham students had first noted on their visit to Zia. She reflected upon the traditions in which she does participate, and the connections she made with her visitors during their short visit.

When they first got here we were kind of nervous, and we didn’t really talk. But after we ate dinner we started playing basketball and we got to know them better. It was fun to have them. I thought they were going to be in moccasins and stuff, and they dressed like me. Their stores are the same distance away as ours. They really liked going upstairs, because they don’t have an upstairs.

They have the buffalo dance, and it has one girl, and that was Heather and she showed me the dance. We don’t really have festivals like they do. But we make maple syrup, we get a lot more snow then they do, we ski and skate…and I played in the Memorial Day celebration with the school band—that’s a town celebration and tradition, and we have the 4th of July. I was really sad [when they left]. I wanted them to stay. I’ve written to them three times. I wrote them the day they left when I got home from school. Heather just wrote me back. I told them we should go out in August for the feast.

This exchange has given students from two small, isolated communities a taste of a larger world in which people can be both outwardly different but also inherently the same. They will know that where they come from is important to who they are, and that they can find connections to others wherever they may find themselves in the future.
Publications of Note

The Organization of Hope: A Workbook for Rural Asset-based Community Development
from the Asset-based Community Development Foundation and the Blandin Foundation

This workbook explains rural asset-based community development, provides current examples of that work (one of which is associated with the Yuba Watershed Alliance, a Rural Trust network site) and provides resources and how-to's to apply to your community. Available through ACTA Publications at (800) 397-2282. The book is $9.

Education and Community Building: Connecting Two Worlds
by Jeanne Jehl, Martin J. Blank and Barbara McCloud

This report offers guidance on how to increase and strengthen the joint efforts of educators and community members and identifies the “sticking points” that can make working together difficult for the two groups. To order, contact the Institute for Educational Leadership at (202) 822-8405, e-mail iel@iel.org. The booklet is $9.

Thriving Together: Connecting Rural School Improvement and Community Development
from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

This practical guide for schools or community organizations provides tips for building effective teams, starting service-learning or entrepreneurial education projects and transforming a school into a community center. It also includes project planning worksheets and checklists, fact sheets and additional resources. Ordering information can be found at www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/fam22.html, or call (512) 476-6861. The book is $39.94 in print; $29.95 as a CD-ROM.

Improving Rural School Facilities: Design, Construction, Finance and Support
edited by Sarah Dewees and Patricia Cahape Hammer

While the condition of rural school facilities varies across the country, most rural school districts face similar issues as they consider new facility construction, renovations or additions. These include: how to gain public support for funding; how to make the best use of local resources; how to design buildings that are useful to the community in a variety of capacities; and how to design renovations or new buildings that optimize instruction and efficiently incorporate technology. This book provides overviews of these issues and offers inspiring case studies of communities that have worked against the odds and succeeded. To order, call AEL at (800) 624-9120 or email aelinfo@ael.org. The book is $18.