



Voices from the Field

Urban Environmental Education: an Avenue towards Community- Based Conservation

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(pre-dissertation fellow, 2008)

For the first meeting with Jennifer Plewka, Director of Education Programs at Phipps Community Development Corporation and one of my community partners, I visited a community garden in the Bronx in June 2008. I arrived early, and two gardeners from Bangladesh and Puerto Rico welcomed me when I entered Drew Gardens. Just one step through the gates, and I escaped from concrete jungles into a lush garden with a scenic view of the Bronx River. When Jennifer came in a minute later, she gave me a tour of this green space. I realized that it was more than a regular community garden. Ten years ago some committed residents of this neighborhood turned a dumping site into a green area that provides multiple services for people and the environment. Today these two acres of land in the heart of the Bronx host a multicultural community garden, urban forest, butterfly garden, and space for community events. As a living classroom, Drew Gardens offers local youth rich opportunities to master environmental stewardship skills through gardening, planting trees, and monitoring of water quality in the Bronx River. Like other environmental educators participating in my

research project, Jennifer hopes that young participants in her educational programs will become advocates for the environment, and in the future will catalyze revitalization of nature in other underserved inner-city communities. She also wants to know what environmental education approaches are effective in promoting community-based conservation.

In summer 2008 I worked with seven educators from six community-based organizations in the Bronx – including Phipps CDC, Bronx River Alliance, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, Rocking the Boat, A.C.T.I.O.N. at the Point CDC, and Sustainable South Bronx – whose goal is to enhance community-based conservation. To support this goal, these NGOs carry out a number of environmental education (EE) programs along the Bronx River. Historically, the focus of EE has been evolving from natural history study to encompass individual behavior change. Urban EE programs in the Bronx have further expanded the goal of EE to foster various types of collective environmental actions. Therefore, desired outcomes and educational approaches in EE programs should be revised to fit the updated goal of EE. In addition to environmental knowledge and environmental stewardship skills, potential desired outcomes of EE might include such things as social capital, which most people would not associate with EE, or community and ecosystem level outcomes. Together with environmental

educators in the Bronx, I am creating a conceptual model of urban EE that will incorporate revised goals for EE, corresponding desired outcomes, and educational approaches. This model will be used to help design, implement, and evaluate urban EE programs that will trigger community-based conservation in cities. Last summer I was able to describe how my community partners conduct EE, including their goals, what activities they implement, and what outcomes they are trying to achieve. This information will assist me in choosing an appropriate methodology for building a conceptual model of urban EE in 2009, which will be based on the shared understanding among environmental educators and grounded in EE theory.

My community partners in the Bronx suggested that urban community-based conservation, which is their goal in EE, should include three components: 1) environmental restoration, 2) monitoring, and 3) activism. Educators also support the idea that community-based conservation can be promoted by engaging youth in authentic participation in real-life conservation projects, which resonates with ideas of ecological citizenship (Light, 2003) and civic ecology (Krasny and Tidball, 2009). In addition to learning about natural history, the educators are involving youth in more practical activities that produce meaningful outcomes for their communities. For example, youth measure environmental quality, restore riparian ecosystems and oyster banks in the Bronx River, manage invasive species in urban forests, raise community awareness of green spaces, and participate in public negotiations about establishing new parks.

While the goal of EE is clear to my community partners, they strive to find corresponding desired outcomes in EE programs, as well as types of youth educational activities that match their EE goals, and that are practical and theoretically justified. Educators and I hope that critical reflection of EE practices and the

new conceptual model of EE that we will build over the next year will contribute to enhancing urban EE programs and to promoting desired individual, community, and environmental outcomes through revising current EE programs. In their turn, these outcomes will help to build more sustainable and resilient social-ecological systems in the Bronx, and more green spaces similar to Drew Gardens that provide benefits for residents of multicultural communities and important ecosystem services. To view some of my summer observations and the map of my research site, please visit <http://thebronxriver.blogspot.com>



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Literature Cited

- Krasny, M. and Tidball, K. (2009) Applying a resilience systems framework to urban environmental education in cities. *Environmental education research* (in revision).
- Light, A. (2003). Urban ecological citizenship. *Journal of social philosophy* 34 (1): 44-63.

