



This PDF file is a digital version of a chapter in the 2005 GWS Conference Proceedings. Please cite as follows:

Harmon, David, ed. 2006. *People, Places, and Parks: Proceedings of the 2005 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: The George Wright Society.

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Environmental Youth Programming in Chicago: Urban Parks Make Their Impact with Place-Based Education

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Environmentalists generally agree that Chicago is one of the greenest cities in the United States. Imprinted upon the city's corporate seal is the Latin motto *urbs in horto*, meaning "city in a garden." The environmental history of Chicago spans over 150 years of development, from its Indian roots when it was named Che-Cau-Gou to its rise as the leading port town in the West to the creation of the development of a cohesive parks systems based on the designs of Frederick Law Olmsted circa 1890. Today, Mayor Richard M. Daley states: "The city of Chicago leads by example. We are building environmentally friendly buildings, purchasing clean fuel burning vehicles, and exploring new technologies that help conserve resources and save money."¹ The city has a proud tradition of valuing environmental progress. However, in order to continue striving for change, this city must invest time and resources into the education of our young people. We must focus our attention on the future of the environmental movement in Chicago and beyond: all of the attempts to move towards a society of conservation rather than one of waste will be lost unless we can educate the next generation of Chicago citizens about how to keep their city as green as can be.

The primary stewardship responsibilities for open space in the city of Chicago rest in the hands of the Chicago Park District. In managing over 7,300 acres of parkland, 33 beaches, 16 lagoons, 9 harbors, and much more, the district operates with the goal of connecting Chicago's people with the unique eco-treasures that surround them. Inherent in working towards that goal is the need to educate those who enjoy the natural spaces about why those spaces must be preserved. Recognizing this need as essential and the most valuable of investments, the Chicago Park District is taking a leading role in offering opportunities in the fields of science and education to teenagers from neighborhoods across Chicago. In order to present environmental education messages in a way that is relevant to urban youth, the best method is to create a program attended by their peers, taught by their neighbors, and located in their backyards. This is known as "place-based education." This method places emphasis on local action that is supplemented with cultural, historical, and environmental factors that are specific to the community being affected. Park Districts are in a unique position to institute place-based programming because they reach many diverse communities in urban areas.

The Junior Earth Team (JET), for example, is a nature- and service-based program that is present in five different Chicago parks and communities through a fiscal partnership with the energy company ComEd/Exelon. The program educates teens to make responsible environmental choices and empowers them to make change in their world. JET is an innovative project. Its facilities, participants, and staff are working and living in the communities they serve. JET employs place-based techniques by immersing itself in the local culture and natural areas of the city and is tailor-made to serve teens at each of its locations. Chosen to rep-

resent a diverse cross-section of Chicago's young audience, JET parks act as settings for youth to make connections with their places. Using local parks as teaching tools, the JET curriculum encourages students to use real-world examples to illustrate broader conservation concepts.

The relevance of place

To achieve a lasting and measurable result, place-based education emphasizes the need for action within one's community. Area culture, history, and geography are infused into a meaningful curriculum; students are taught local particulars of an issue that translate into a deeper understanding of the issue on a broader scale.

Think back to your personal connections with nature as a young person. When did you first realize that nature is an important issue in *your* life? Did it come from a textbook or from images of a far-off land? Or was it the first time you caught a frog, or saw a fish swimming by, or maybe it was when you went for a walk in the park?

An effective connection between teacher and student

Making a real and lasting connection between youth and their impact on their local environment acts as a driving force and even a mission statement for environmental educators. This is undoubtedly true. Too often, however, educators use far-off examples: the decimation of tropical rainforests, imminent extinction of Sumatran tigers, melting of polar ice caps, and desertification. These are meant to illustrate our planet's uncertain future on the large scale. However, these examples remain abstract; local teens have nothing in their life experience that relates. The bridge between the object and subject must be built from scratch, and mortared with empathy. These examples are fine motivating factors behind encouragement of action and responsible behavior among students, but spending one day in the park can have a greater impact than a book full of abstraction.

“The importance of our stewardship project is that we got the chance to give back to our community. We were able to plant a garden in our park for many people to enjoy.”

— Jenny Santiago, Humboldt Park JET, age 16 (2003)

“I enjoyed the visits to other JET parks because they were nice and they treated us like their own. We worked with JETs all over Chicago and learned about their parks and they learned about ours.”

— Daniela Mitchem, Jackson Park JET, age 14, (2003)

Nuts and bolts of a new direction

Conceptual investigation of problematic issues occurring in inaccessible areas almost negates the importance of the issues themselves. The problems seem remote, overwhelming, and unsolvable; educators run the risk of developing eco-phobia amongst their students. Urban teens are at a stage in their lives when they begin to (or have completely) shed the innocence of their childhood and face difficult realities in their families, schools, neighbor-

hoods, and peer groups. It is the responsibility of environmental educators to provide programming through which teens can identify a problem that:

1. Can be visually identified, analyzed, and understood by the students.
2. Encourages active stewardship.
3. Has a solution that is readily implemented and that encourages ownership and pride in the students' local community.²

Place-based educators believe that when people learn about the ecological patterns of, cycles in, and human impact upon the place they inhabit, they will be more prepared to take on the role of active steward.³ Any city has the ability to apply these tenets to its programming and should strive to implement place-based pedagogy.

In Chicago, we have an ideal backdrop of diverse human populations situated near distinct environments including dunes, wetlands, and forests. The Chicago Park District's JET program brings together groups of teens that live in the neighborhoods surrounding these natural areas, provides them with site-specific curricula, and spends time and resources supporting the active stewardship of *their own* environment. Even the teaching staff comes from the community.

Through place-based strategies, JET avoids the pitfalls of standardized testing, worksheets, and performance evaluations (these factors generally are considered when hiring and evaluating youth in programs with paychecks), and replaces them with personal experiences that make the subject matter individually relevant for each student.⁴

Case studies

As the place-based movement builds momentum, educational programs work towards connecting the communities they serve with those people's needs and interests. The community provides the context for learning, student work concentrates on area-specific needs and interests, and local professionals and institutions act as resources and partners throughout the process of teaching and discovery. The following examples show that, in Chicago, a new methodology connecting people with their place is changing the landscape of environmental education. Specific activities of JET are mentioned as well as another initiative from this organization.

JET in River and Jackson Parks. The JET program develops new projects every summer for each of its five locations. The content is site-specific. Individual locations along with each park's unique features determine what the students will do in terms of stewardship and how they will make their impact on the community. Each group is given a theme and free rein to develop it into a six-week project that illustrates how it is represented at the park.

River Park, aptly named for its position along the North Branch of the Chicago River, is the location of a contracted relationship between the Chicago Park District and a canoeing organization that works with the JETs. The teens learned paddling techniques so well that they were able to teach them to their JET colleagues from other areas of the city. They used pond dipping, fishing, botanical studies, and bird watching to create a comprehensive biological map of the park based on their theme "What Swims Through Our City?"

Jackson Park, located on the Southside lakefront of Chicago, teamed up in 2004 with

the Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network to perform a “citizen–scientist” study involving Bobolink Meadow, a small prairie adjacent to the park. The teens spent six weeks studying the butterflies that migrate through the meadow and their findings were added to the statewide database.

Nature Oasis Outdoor Classroom. In addition to the JET program, ComEd/Exelon Corporation also funds the Nature Oasis Outdoor Classroom, another Chicago Park District program. The outdoor classroom works directly with K–12 schools, providing them with opportunities to use their local park as a field trip site for nature exploration. Led by an Exelon Fellow, a Chicago Public Schools teacher on loan to the park district, each visit focuses on education, stewardship, and reflection. Caring for the park next to their school helps foster a sense of pride and ownership of that area with the ultimate goal being that children who spend time experiencing nature grow up to be ecologically conscious adults. The outdoor classroom provides opportunity for self-reflection as well, which helps the students identify what parts of the trip had meaning for them and what environmental concepts they are interesting in pursuing further.

Conclusion

Here in Chicago and, as shown in various case studies, around the country, educators are beginning to make connections between their students and the cultures from which they come. Too often we trot out far-distant problems, study about them in books, write hypothetical solutions that are global in scope and, in the end, come to the conclusion that we can do no more. By empowering youth in their own communities, educators allow their students to succeed more naturally and in ways that are relevant for their own development.

JET students in Chicago parks are tackling real, tangible, and accessible environmental issues. The Chicago Park District emphasizes place-based education that brings the people out of their houses and into their local parks where they can touch, smell, feel, and hear nature. It is a program that connects teens to their community parks and brings stewardship of their city to the forefront.

The pedagogy of place is a growing one and while much of the practice is happening in some small schools, park districts can be equally important in bringing these methodologies to young people across the country. As urban teens grow to value and invest in their parks, often the only natural areas they have ever seen, their attachment to the world around them grows in strength and scope for the rest of their lives.

Endnotes

1. City of Chicago, *Conserve Chicago Together. What You Can Do: A Guide for Chicago Residents* (2004).
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4. T.J. Gibbs and A. Howley, “World-class Standards and Local Pedagogies: Can We Do Both?” *ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools* ED448014 (2000).