



Are Your Programs Heading in the Right Direction?

By Karen Garland

“We are constantly evaluating things in the world around us, but we usually do so quite informally. We may be curious why something works the way it does, what would make something better, or what we should do differently. Evaluating your program is not all that different, though it will likely be more formal.” - MEERA

Are you interested in knowing if there is value in your program efforts or if you are satisfactorily addressing the needs of your visitors? Do you aspire to increase the number of guests who are visiting your center, so are considering adding new programs or expanding existing ones? Are funders requesting information about program achievement? If you answered “yes” to any of the questions then it might be time for a comprehensive program evaluation.

If you have an evaluation and assessment plan in place, great! If not, then now is an ideal time to develop one, as there are several good reasons to devote resources to this important endeavor.

Program evaluations can help you:

- Clarify that the objectives are met and that the program is running as originally planned;
- Understand, verify, or provide information to improve the quality



program.

It can include any of a variety of methods, such as for-needs assessments, accreditation, cost/benefit analysis, effectiveness, efficiency,

of future education activities and consumer satisfaction, as strengths and weaknesses are identified;

- Create opportunities to report to funders about performance and effectiveness;
- Generate data or verify results that can be used for public relations and promoting services in the community;
- Produce valid comparisons between programs to decide if they should be retained, especially in the face of pending budget cuts; and
- Promote professionalism in the field of environmental education.

Yet, what is program evaluation?

Evaluations are an ongoing learning cycle; a procedure that starts with planning, leads into data collections, analysis, and interpretation, and then to action and improvement as you move into the decision-making process. To put it simply—a vigilant collection and examination of information used to assess the worth of a

formative, summative, goal-based, process, outcomes, etc. The type of evaluation you undertake to improve or expand your programs depends on what you want to learn. However, you should not be as concerned about what type of evaluation you need to do, but should be more attentive to what you would like to know and how you can accurately collect and understand the information.

Yet, many people do not consider evaluating their programs because they believe that evaluation is about proving the success or failure of a program. This myth assumes that success means implementing the perfect program and never having to hear from employees, teachers, students, parents, or other stakeholders again—in other words, the program will run itself perfectly. However, this is not a realistic view, since success is about remaining open to continuous feedback and adjusting the program accordingly. Evaluation does not take a linear approach, but is cyclical.

Thus, think about the last time you took a road trip. You probably obtained directions by using an online map or punched the destination into your GPS. This is not unlike planning a strong environmental education program—you know where you want to go and you map out how to get there. However, in our frenzied lives, we often have the tendency to “get into the car and drive,” creating and teaching programs, not pausing to evaluate if we are going in the right direction to meet our objectives.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- There is no “perfect” evaluation design. Do not worry about the plan being perfect. It is far more important to do something, than to wait until every detail has been tested.
- Work hard to include some interviews in your evaluation methods. Questionnaires do not capture “the story,” and the story is usually the most powerful depiction of the benefits of your services.
- Do not interview just the successes. You will learn a great deal about the program by understanding its failures, dropouts, etc.

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Consequently, the more focused we are about what we want to examine, the more efficient we can be in the getting to our destination. The results can be used to help make certain decisions (instrumental) or contribute to advancing understanding and influencing people's thinking (conceptual). Just be sure that what you want to measure is concrete, specific, and measurable.

Hence, there are several points to consider that will help ensure the success of the project:

Before You Begin Your Journey

- Do you have programs or activities that are suitable for evaluation?
- Have you determined a clear division of responsibilities and cooperation of the team?
- Do you have the time, materials, space, money, and expertise?

As You Steer Through the Process

- Determine the reason for wanting to conduct an evaluation. (Are we meeting our objectives? How can we improve our programs? How can we best tailor our mission?)
- Establish and define the objectives of the evaluation (What is the effect of the program? Objectives should not only be defined, but are they measurable?)
- Decide which groups' data should be collected and when it should be collected.
- Select one or more data collection methods (interviews, written, observations, etc.)
- Create the research instrument (should be short, questions clearly stated, must measure what it is intended to measure, etc.)
- Collect the data
- Process, analyze, and interpret the results drawing conclusions.
- Write a final report about the results and conclusions.

Some consider evaluations to be a complex process that usually includes the use of outside experts. The good news is that if you are unable to fund an outside consultant, your organization can still learn a great deal by applying the methods and analyzing the results yourself. However, there is the possibility that the data will not be interpreted fairly if it is processed and analyzed by the people who manage the actual program, as they intentionally or unintentionally may be "policing" themselves. This caution is not to fault program managers, but to recognize the strong biases inherent in trying to be objective with the programs they manage. Therefore, if possible, have someone other than the program managers process the evaluation results.

Completing an evaluation will help you predict and meet future challenges, integrate ideas across your organization, and improve relationships with key stakeholders. With the growing concern about the future development of programs, completing an evaluation will help you hopefully make better choices, as you discover efficient ways to implement programs that support your organization's mission. There is tremendous value in knowing that you are being the most effective, with the resources that you have available.

A Movement is Afoot

The Power of Community, EEA Executive Director

It is often easy for us to become bogged down with the details of everyday EE work. We feel the weight of our daily duties that follow us from 9 to 5 and beyond. There is often little choice but to focus on the next school group, the next grant proposal, the next internal emergency. It can be difficult for environmental educators to stay focused on the big picture and on our ultimate goal.



At the EEA Annual Conference on March 11, I was reminded of why I first became involved in the organization. The people engaged in environmental education are inspiring. They work hard and they work together. They share their ideas and talents freely because they believe in the mission of the work they do and are passionate about the message they share. For a professional environmental educator, the conference helps to remind us not only of our goals, but why it is possible to reach those goals.

EEA exists because there is a small, but rapidly growing group of people that share a vision. A statewide culture of environmental literacy and stewardship is a lofty goal, but it is also attainable. Not because we will work hard or give selflessly to the cause, but because of who we are as a community. At the EEA Conference, I witnessed that community and I know that no dream is too big.

Sincerely,



Paul McClendon

Heading in Right Direction Continued

As part of its ongoing mission to be a resource for environmental educators, the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia has a professional certification program, Advanced Training for Environmental Education in Georgia (ATEEG), which includes a course in assessment and evaluation. For more information about the program visit www.eealliance.org.

Additional Resources

- The Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP)— www.epa.gov/enviroed/eetap
- North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)— www.naaee.org
- My Environmental Education Evaluation Resource Assistant (MEERA)— meera.snre.umich.edu

References

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Soulful Landscape Workshop Connects Participants

By Karen Rent

On the coast of Acadia National Park stands a particular pink granite ledge. Although it remains close to the beaten path, one can easily find solitude there. Looking out from the rock toward the glittering sea, old soaker lays to the left and to the right stands “the man in the rocks”, a cliff face that resembles a person...at least to me. This is my place. It is my rock.



I spent countless hours on that ledge – sitting alone, spending time with friends, watching the moonrise, basking in the sunshine. I went there when I was happy, sad, stressed, or relaxed. I can still be there in an instant even though I am a thousand miles away.

Erica Wheeler's *Soulful Landscape* workshop brought me back there. Through writing exercises and song, it connected that place to where I am now. It offered me a reminder of how important time in a place really is.

Her workshop affected me both personally and professionally. It reminded me to continue to find beauty in my natural surroundings and to always take time to sit outside and, well...just sit. As an environmental educator, it motivated me to provide unstructured time during my programs.

“...as an environmental educator, it motivated me to provide unstructured time during my programs”

I hope to give my students a chance to create their own connections and perhaps discover their own special spots so that one day, when asked about a place that has meaning to them, they will recall those moments outside in the woods, hopefully with smiles on their faces.

2011 COOL Grants Expand Outdoor Learning

By Karen Wood

The Environmental Education Alliance is pleased to announce the award of three new COOL Outdoor Learning Mini-Grants. Congratulations to these winners: Rock Eagle 4-H Center, Oakhurst Farm Educational Center, and Creek View Elementary School.



The \$500 mini-grants are intended to jump-start outdoor learning projects in Georgia. Rock Eagle will use the grant to add a new section of a popular ornithology class

to the course offerings available for visiting schools. Oakhurst Farm formed a non-profit educational center that will offer agricultural field trips for schools in a part of the state not served by local environmental education centers. Lastly, Creek View Elementary will create an outdoor learning backpack for each grade level. Projects will be completed by May of this year.

Seventeen applicants applied for the mini-grants, offered through EEA's Council of Outdoor Learning (formerly the Outdoor Classroom Council). Only limited funds prevented more of the outstanding proposals from being funded. Donations for the mini-grant fund are gratefully accepted by EEA at any time.

Next year, the deadline to apply for a COOL Outdoor Learning Mini-Grant will be November 28, 2011. This grant deadline is more than a month after the October 21 Outdoor Learning Symposium, to allow those who attend the event to be inspired by the presentations and seek funding to replicate their favorite projects. Of course, proposals to fund innovative ideas are also welcome. Applicants must be members of EEA and - a new requirement next year - must be affiliated or partnered with a public or private non-profit school in Georgia. For details of grant requirements and a copy of the simple online application, check the EEA website under “Initiatives.”

Save the Date
for the **2011**
Outdoor Learning Symposium
Friday, October 21st
at Georgia Perimeter College/Decatur Campus

The 2011 FFA Conference as Viewed by a First time Attendee

—By Daishell Densler, Clean Air Campaign Intern—

Environmental education is important because it brings awareness and informs us about green issues within our community and society. Having the chance to participate in the Environmental Education Alliance annual conference this year was a wonderful occasion for me because I had never recognized how important the environment means to me.

I did not realize the importance of unstructured space and the changes that we as a society could make by picking up garbage alongside a river, just as college students from Georgia Southern had done in the “Unstructured Space and Time within a Structured Outdoor Education Program” session had done. Their presentation taught me to value our planet because we rely on it for so many resources. Because of this, I am participating in more sustainable actions to keep my environment

safe and clean, as I also bring this awareness to my family and friends.

In addition, the conference offered presentations that ranged from issues dealing with Georgia's water crises to human diversity. All of the sessions I attended were very informative and I am excited that I can take the practical lessons shared from each session and apply them to my everyday life.

As a student and an intern, I would definitely encourage my peers to become educated about the various environmental issues. I would also recommend that they, and everyone else who is interested in the environment, attend the conference next year because it provided me with the self-assurance that I could make a difference one environmental issue at a time.



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Environmental Education Alliance

Recognizes Award Winners

Outstanding PK - 16 Educator

Tamera Neal is a Target Teacher at Tritt Elementary School in Cobb County, leader of Tritt River Kids, and the creator of a

unique school program for third graders called Life is a River.

Tamera deserves recognition because of the nontraditional methods she has utilized, her

innovation in incorporating EE into lesson plans, and the number of colleagues (and as a result the number of students) she has reached with Life is a River. It's an amazing accomplishment for a teacher when a program she develops is picked up and modeled across their county.



Outstanding Service to Environmental Education by an Individual

Deron Davis has the business sense of Steve Jobs; conservation commitment of David Brower; pizzazz of Catherine Zeta-Jones, and the heart of



Lassie. Combined, these characteristics have led Deron through an exciting career of environmental education

and communications. He began his EE career with Petey Giroux and Jerry Hightower, leading nature programs that incorporated EE with the arts. He then was hired as the Director of the Dunwoody Nature Center, but soon moved to GA EPD, where in his 9 years, helped bridge the often-disconnected worlds of education and communications. Deron then shifted gears to focus his efforts on water conservation as Director of the GA WaterSmart Program, a state-wide education campaign designed to help Georgia's use water more efficiently outdoors. Lastly, he is now enjoying a new position as Director of Conservation for the Nature Conservancy, Georgia Chapter.

Outstanding Service to Environmental Education by an Organization

Georgia River Network advocates for water quality and access, keeps a watchful eye on state legislation and challenges movements



that could degrade water quality or access in the state. GRN provides trainings and an annual conference to support local riverkeepers, empowering citizens to act to protect their watersheds. In 2004 GRN began Paddle Georgia, an annual week-long paddling adventure, open to all skill levels, created to enjoy Georgia's rivers while engaging and educating participants so that they may become involved in the protection and restoration of those rivers. GRN recognizes that providing a strong platform of resources for the public creates informed citizens who are able to enjoy the rivers throughout the state in a program like Paddle Georgia, and allows for them to then become involved in protection of their local waters.

Eugene Odum Lifetime Achievement Award

Karen Garland is extremely passionate, excited, and knowledgeable of the natural world. Not a day passes that she does not spark someone's curiosity about the natural world. If you have ever taken one of her classes, you know how much she loves nature trivia! Beginning her career at the Chattahoochee Nature Center, Karen began developing her natural talents and skills by engaging people age three to senior citizen status on the ecology of the natural world through hands-on learning experiences and programs. Her next move took her to the Georgia Conservancy. During her 10 years there, Karen expanded the organization's influence beyond the walls of the State Capitol and into Georgia's schools, nature centers, garden clubs and anywhere that would listen to her. She has also volunteered on numerous committees and continues to give back to her community and profession.

Become an EEA Member Today!

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS INCLUDE:

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER - Provides educational resources, legislative updates, notice of workshops and events, grant opportunities, and much more.

ANNUAL SPRING CONFERENCE & FALL SYMPOSIUM - Held at different sites throughout Georgia with guest speakers, workshops and field trips. A great opportunity to meet people and share.

SHARING & EXCHANGING RESOURCES - The opportunity to find and exchange ideas with member organizations.

DISCOUNTS TO EVENTS - Attend annual conference, the Outdoor Classroom Symposium and other EEA events at a discounted rate.

Seeing Opportunity Where We Once Saw Challenge

By Robbie Astrove, *Current Issues Co-Chairperson*

To expand on a familiar quote from our friend Kermit the Frog, "It's not easy teaching green." As educators, we intuitively know this. Despite the many issues and challenges we face in the field of environmental education (EE), there is also an incredible movement afoot!

This is also true with EEA, as the organization is now observing opportunity, where we once saw challenge. Paul McClendon, EEA's executive director, shared this observation in *The Link's* 2010 winter issue and again more strongly during his "State of Environmental Education" address at the 2011 Annual EEA Conference. Those present learned how EEA is growing and thriving. I left the conference energized and inspired to do more than ever to increase those opportunities.

One of the greatest values I observed during the conference is that for one day the EE community intentionally gathers, representing agencies and organizations from throughout the state. It is a powerful occasion that presents an opportunity to listen, learn, and synthesize where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.

In fact, this is exactly what transpired during a focus group that was organized as part of the conference. The session revealed many remarkable things that both validated and questioned EEA's effectiveness. Part of this discussion included the new Current Issues Committee (CIC), which was created after listening to our members and incorporating this information into EEA's new strategic plan.

The CIC actively advances current and emerging environmental education issues through stakeholder engagement and partnerships, advocacy, and outreach. The committee exists to monitor a holistic suite of activities in order to educate members, disseminate information, and encourage member action. A few of our priorities include:

- Promote the creation and implementation of an environmental literacy plan in Georgia;
- Collaborate with public health professionals, organizations, and agencies;
- Facilitate member dialogue regarding current issues, concerns, and barriers to creating a statewide culture of environmental literacy and stewardship.

Consequently, this is where you come in, as the listening and synthesizing is far from over. In fact, we are just starting this venture to shape our collective voices and better advocate for Georgia's environment. That is why it is monumentally

important for you to engage with this committee and EEA as a whole.

In order to serve members we must know what is important to you and where the challenges exist. Therefore, please:

- Visit the new website, which includes a CIC page. It has links,



The Petey Giroux Dragonfly Takes to the Coast

By Laura Aikens, *Captain Planet*

At the 2011 EEA Annual Conference, the Petey Giroux Dragonfly Grant was awarded to the Georgia Sea Turtle Center (GSTC) on Jekyll Island. Alicia Marin, education coordinator at GSTC, was present to accept the grant and share a synopsis of their project.



The theatrical wonder her center created is an interactive program that exposes children to the fine arts as a form of entertainment and expression. The audience follows Scute, the Loggerhead Sea Turtle and GSTC mascot, on an unforgettable adventure that includes his migration in the sea, encounters with other coastal critters, and the dangers of marine debris.

She further explained that Scute's Ocean Adventure™ puppet show began with Popsicle sticks and hand-drawn puppets. However, with the help of the grant, the program will expand to ten professional puppets and a stage, allowing the program to be presented to over 200 students before the end of the 2010-2011 school year.

The mission of the GSTC is to increase human understanding, appreciation, and conservation efforts of the southeastern coastal environment and its marine inhabitants. This puppet show will increase students' knowledge about ecosystems, endangered marine life, and the impact of humans on the environment through language arts and science.

Congratulations GSTC on incorporating the arts into your programs. We know Petey would be proud!

Seeing Opportunity Continued

articles, and forthcoming updates on important action items. Let us know if this page serves your needs.

- Drop in the community forum area on the website to contribute to the current issues thread with ideas, challenges, opportunities, and solutions. Will you be the first to post something meaningful and create value for others?
- If you have not already done so, please take a few moments to complete the strategic planning member survey.

The CIC is looking for interested members to join this effort. Email us via the current issues committee webpage if you would like to participate.

This committee reflects the positive strides being undertaken by the organization. Make sure your voice is heard by joining us in the movement that is afoot!

EEA gives back with a Saturday Service Project: East of Eden Farm

The theme for the 2011 EEA Conference, Sustaining a Changing World: Environment, Economy, Community, was well recognized during the Saturday Service Project at East of Eden Farm. Several EEA members participated in the farm's spring cleaning and tour in Acworth, Georgia. Something that struck the participants early on was that the farm wasn't what one typically imagines, acres upon acres out in a rural area. Instead, it was located in the backyard of a typical, upper middle class suburban neighborhood. I always imagined you'd need lots of space to grow enough food to feed a family, but Sam and Britton Burton had seven small beds along one side of their backyard fence. Since it was only March, nothing was growing yet - but they assured me that they grew enough each season to feed themselves, give some away to the neighbors, and entertain the notion of selling some at the local farmer's markets.

...the Burtons inspired many of us to begin continue our own vegetable gardens at home, & recognize the benefit of both growing your own food & purchasing from local farmers //

In their garage, they had a large tub of fuzzy chicks, waiting to go out to their other pasture where the animals are kept. Although the Burtons do keep laying hens, these particular chicks were being raised for their meat. After the volunteers cleaned, weeded, and mulched the vegetable beds, we drove out to their rented pastureland 15 minutes away. There, we were greeted by several sheep, three cows, three goats, two flocks of chickens, and several rabbits. The Burtons shared their experiences with animal husbandry, having jumped right in without any previous experience. Although

Sam works outside the farm, Britton works full time taking care of the animals. It was very interesting to hear their perspective on raising and slaughtering their own meat, and how they learned to respect all aspects of those animals.

In the end, the Burtons inspired many of us to begin or continue our own vegetable gardens at home, and recognize the benefit of both growing your own food and purchasing from local farmers. It was a fun and educational afternoon for all.



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