North Carolina Environmental Education Certification Program

OVERVIEW: North Carolina was the first state to create a professional development program for environmental educators, enrolling its first educators in 1995. The program is managed by the Office of Environmental Education and Public Affairs within the NC Department of Environmental Quality and is a partnership between the NC Department of Public Instruction, Environmental Educators of North Carolina, the NC Association of Environmental Education Centers and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission.

PROGRAM GOALS: The North Carolina certification program encourages professional development in environmental education and recognizes educators committed to environmental stewardship.

- Increase the environmental literacy of participants
- Provide practical environmental education teaching methods
- Foster community-based leadership

The program supports North Carolina’s environmental literacy plan by building leaders and organizations in all regions that provide quality environmental education and strengthening the preparation and professional development of teachers and nonformal educators.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE? The program’s audience includes nonformal educators representing a wide variety of nonprofit and city, county and state and federal agencies including parks, nature centers, science museums, gardens, arboreta, aquariums, coastal reserves, soil and water conservation districts, the N.C. Forest Service and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Classroom teachers, retirees, volunteers, undergraduate and graduate students, college professors and people seeking second or “encore” careers also make up a significant number of participants. Out of state participants are welcome to enroll in the program.

The program has seen steady growth in enrollment since it began. Recently, an increasing number of college programs are incorporating parts of the program into teacher and nonformal education programs. The program will continue to help educators and organizations provide quality programs and resources, benefitting local communities while investing in the future of North Carolina.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE: The office established an Environmental Education Certification Committee to serve in an advisory role to the program. The committee includes members representing the nonformal environmental education community, classroom teachers, colleges and universities, environmental education program providers and local and state agencies. The group reviews program components and approves additions to program criteria.
PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Certification is a self-paced, experiential program that includes six different components and aligns with the North American Association for Environmental Education’s Guidelines for Excellence. Participants have four years to complete all requirements. Upon completion, and in order to remain current with their certification, 50 hours of continuing education must be completed every 5 years.

- Basics of Environmental Education independent study - required
- Instructional Workshops (70 hours)
  - Methods of Teaching Environmental Education – required
  - All workshops must include a curriculum guide (Ex: Project Learning Tree, WILD, NAI CIG training, Leopold Education Project, State Park EE Learning Experiences, etc.)
- Instructor-led Outdoor Experiences (50 hours)
- Knowledge of Environmental Education Resources and Facilities (30 hours)
- Experience Teaching Environmental Education (30 hours)
- A Community Partnership Project (20 hours)

Benefits

- Sets best practices for environmental education programs in the state and provides environmental educators with guidelines for materials, resources, teaching and programs.
- Helps nonformal environmental educators and classroom teachers find professional development opportunities and environmental education curricula.
- Helps classroom teachers earn continuing education units (CEUs) for teacher licensure, as most certification programs also count towards teacher CEUs.
- Helps create an information clearinghouse of existing programs and materials available to teachers and nonformal educators for professional development.
- Trains teachers and provides resources to teach earth/environmental science, which is a required course for graduating high school students and does not have a standard textbook.
- Improves environmental education outreach to nonformal educators in the state.
- Provides a widely recognized professional development credential that is often used in hiring.
- Provides practical training for individuals seeking volunteer opportunities or embarking on second or “encore” careers.

For more information, visit the Office of Environmental Education’s website at www.eenorthcarolina.org
**Participant Feedback**

When educators complete their certification, they respond to an exit survey that provides information on how the program changed their teaching and if it helped advance their career goals. Here are a few quotes from participants:

- It is the hands-on experiences that have really stuck with me. Getting up, going outside, doing things is so much more meaningful than sitting in a classroom and listening. They both have their perks but the hands-on experiences provide mental stimulation and it also provides you with a personal connection and stronger memory of the topic. I try to incorporate hands-on experiences with every program or workshop that I facilitate.

- The EE resources out there are boundless and I’m thrilled that the certification program exposed me to so many of them by offering diverse workshops in locations all across the state.

- I think it is important to see different parts of the state and learn how different environmental subjects are taught. Even though my focus is on coastal environmental education, I learned from all my workshop experiences by observing different teaching styles and the ways that people connect to the environment no matter where they live.

- I think there are many sides to each environmental issue and going through this certification process helps you to be able to understand the science content behind the issue and then gives you the people skills to be able to talk about the varying viewpoints. If we are going to help solve the environmental issues we face, then as educators, we better have a strong sense and skill of environmental communication.

- It allowed me to expand my knowledge of different lesson plans but also allowed me to meet other educators and learn about their experiences.

- I have used a number of the activities from the workshops in my teaching. I have also learned a lot about different flora and fauna which has helped me be a more thoughtful educator. I have deepened my appreciation for the natural world, especially the diversity here in North Carolina.

- The program allowed me to change careers. When I began my certification, I was a high school biology teacher. Since then, I have moved to working in nonformal education as a program specialist and as an adjunct biology teacher.

- The program helped me find a job. I currently work with K-12 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics teachers in formal and informal settings. I help put on professional development workshops and also run a technology library of equipment that we check-out to our regional teachers for free.
• Program has helped me build my knowledge base. I have worked in a zoo for so long I don't want to pigeon holed when I look for another job later down the road. I could not only work at a zoo again...but now also as an environmental educator at a nature park, nature center, city park, etc. It broadens my options down the road. This is also a good way to build more of a tool box for my current educator position. The more tools in your tool box...the better presenter/educator you will be.

• It allowed me to grow as a young professional in the field of environmental education and conservation.

• Through this certification process I have learned how much more effective education can be when students make their own decisions and connections, rather than me directing them to a certain conclusion. They are much more motivated and delve deeper into specific issues and projects when allowed to let their passions and interest combined with the information provided through environmental education lessons, lead their learning. I also had several interactions as I was teaching during this process, particularly during my community action project, that helped me learn about the need for presenting all sides of an issue and how a community is much more likely to come together when all sides of an environmental issue can be explored.

• The program helped me find a job as a Water Conservation and Efficiency Analyst.

• It helped me start an "encore" or post-retirement career. I have been a formal elementary education educator for many years and have never lead or taught environmental education lessons until now. I will still be teaching elementary school but plan to use this certification in my post-retirement years, coming up in four more years. I hope to work as an informal educator at a park or at the local botanical garden, where I now volunteer. This certification has helped me have confidence and knowledge in environmental education topics and had helped me to learn how to guide education.

• It provided credit towards my degree program. The Criteria I (Instructional) workshops were my favorite because it helped me to get my feet wet in the EE world in fun activities. I had just started my Masters in Environmental Education and did not feel as if I belonged in the field yet but the workshops helped me to meet new people and learn more about how environmental education applies to my field.