

## Turning Manatees into Mermaids – My ATEEG Experience

I was recently in the throes of planning outdoor summer workshops for high school students, specifically those not especially enamored with Nature, or school. Staring at my computer, I felt my enthusiasm drain. How was I going to actually pull this off? What if I had to turn it into a totally virtual camp? Did I really have the energy for any of this? Would anything I was planning even *matter* to a group of cell-phone-centered city teens?

Discouraged, I downed some ibuprofen, then pulled out my always-handy ATEEG “toolbox”. Like a calming friend, the concepts, strategies and guidelines learned during ATEEG (which stands for Advanced Training for Environmental Education in Georgia) guided me into the daunting process of planning. An hour later, my headache had eased and although there was still plenty to do, I felt more confident and once again excited about teaching.

It wasn't the first time I'd leaned on what I'd learned in ATEEG – as a non-formal educator, it astonishes me how many ways ATEEG's coursework has helped me professionally. Beginning the course, I felt like a manatee among mermaids. As a recent corporate escapee, I'd been volunteering at a local school garden, which had piqued my interest in working outside with kids. Fate steered me to Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center, a nervous newbie in a class of formally trained (and very smart-sounding) educators. Thankfully, my sense of inadequacy faded. Buoyed by excellent instructors and patient mentors, I eventually emerged ATEEG-certified and ready to facilitate enriching, Nature-based learning.

I've since spent my time connecting people with Nature. I've used science to motivate unsuspecting pre-teens to advocate passionately for stormwater mitigation and conservation of wildlife habitat. I've engaged their parents in workshops that helped alleviate unfounded fears of coyotes and snakes, and inspired home gardens. My ATEEG “toolbox” has helped me assist university professors working on regional citizen science projects, inspire Project- and Problem-Based Learning in public schools, and even convince cities to identify and develop environmental education sites.

But the best thing so far? I've gotten teens so engaged outside that they forgot to take selfies!



*Tixie Fowler was certified through the ATEEG program in March of 2019. Since then, she has worked with the Georgia Association of Conservation Districts, developing educational outreach in school and communities in Gwinnett and DeKalb counties. For more information about ATEEG visit <https://www.eealiance.org/ateeg.html>*