



Improve Your Place

Activity 96

Each living thing has a habitat – a place to live that suits its needs. For human beings, the community they live in is their habitat. In this activity, students are encouraged to plan and carry out a service learning project that focuses on making positive environmental changes in their community.

Levels

Grades 5-8

Subjects

Science, Social Studies, Visual Arts

Concepts

- Governments change and evolve over the years. Such changes affect the lives of the citizens, as well as resource management and environmental policies. (5.8)
- Increased public knowledge of the environment and the need for conservation of natural resources have resulted in lifestyle changes in many cultures. (5.12)

Skills

Defining Problems, Solving Problems, Evaluating



Technology Connections

Presentation Software, Word Processing Software

Materials

Chart paper, rulers, drawing pencils, markers, stencils (optional), tracing paper, transparent overlays, digital camera (optional)

Time Considerations

Activity: Varies, depending on project

Related Activities

Planning the Ideal Community, I'd Like to Visit a Place Where, Then and Now

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OBJECTIVES

- Students will identify ways they can improve their local area.
- Students will create and carry out a plan to improve the area.

ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- When students present their plan, ask the decision-making individual or group to provide feedback on the thoroughness and clarity of the plan and presentation.
- After completing the project, have students (1) evaluate the effectiveness of the project based on the criteria they identified in the plan, (2) describe intended and unintended consequences of the project, and (3) reflect on ways the project could be more effective by providing either next steps or tips for others trying to do a similar project.

BACKGROUND

Students should consider various improvement projects at school or at nearby places. Simple projects might include planting flowers, grass, shrubs, or trees; painting benches; putting up fencing; scrubbing graffiti off walls; finding ways to reduce or eliminate litter; or designing a mural for a nearby wall. A more elaborate project might be designing an environmental study area. Students can plan their project to coincide with Earth Day (April 22), Arbor Day (date varies by state, so you should contact your state forester), or the birthday of a historical figure or community leader.

GETTING READY

Before tackling a project, consider the scope of the project and the limitations of what you can do. Your group can simply survey the project area and make recommendations for improvement to the appropriate authorities. Or they can seek funding from the PTA, school board, or a garden club to actually carry out the project.

Make arrangements for students to present their plan to the individual or group charged with making decisions about

the project area.

For more information about planning and implementing a service learning or environmental action project, see the GreenWorks! Guide at www.plt.org.

DOING THE ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to list as many adjectives as possible that describe the school grounds or other project area. Which of the adjectives describe physical characteristics? Which describe the feelings the area evokes? Is there anything about the project area students wish was different?
2. Take your students outside to survey the area. They should look for things they like about it, as well as any possible problems (such as excess litter; dead grass; lack of trees and other plants; soil erosion; or broken play equipment, drinking fountains, or benches).
3. As they survey the area, have students sketch a simple map of it. If you have a camera, students might also take pictures of what they observe.
4. If possible, have students interview and survey people who use the area to get other opinions on how the area could be improved.

5. After this initial survey, help students create a single, large map of the site as it currently exists. You may need to make a large grid on which to lay out the map. The map can have simple symbols such as circles for trees, squares or triangles for play equipment, and so on.

6. Have teams of students brainstorm ideas on how they might improve the area. Each team should propose its ideas to the rest of the group. Write these ideas on the board and have students vote for the idea they'd like to try.

7. Help students determine whether they will need to persuade the PTA, school board, or another decision-making body to approve their project. You might also look to your community for other supportive parents, individuals, and organizations.

8. Divide the group into teams, each responsible for preparing one of the following pieces of an action plan for achieving their goal:

- Background Information (What is the area identified for the project? Who uses it? What is the need for this project?)
- The Problem (What surveys were done of the area? What problem was identified from the surveys? Where

is the problem located?)


- Recommendations (What actions could be taken to solve the problem? Which action do students recommend and why? What are possible future projects?)
- Details of the Project (Who will be involved? How much will it cost? Who will do the work? How will the project benefit the community?)
- Maps of the Project (What does the project area look like now? How would it look after the project is complete?)
- Expected Results (What results do students hope to achieve? How will students know whether the project was successful?)

9. When students have finished a draft of their plan, they should evaluate it using the following questions:

- Is there sufficient evidence to warrant this project?
- What alternative actions could be taken?
- Is the action that students are proposing the best one? Why?
- What are the ecological, social, and economic consequences of this project?
- Are there legal consequences? If so, what are they? (If some parents are lawyers, ask them.)

- Do we have the skills, time, and materials needed for the project? If not, who can help?

Using this evaluation, students can make adjustments to their plan. They should also be prepared to answer questions like these when they propose their plan to the decision-making individual or group.

 10. Have students use word processing or presentation software to make a final version of the plan.


11. Help students present their plan to the decision-making individual or group, asking for approval of the plan.

12. Upon approval of the plan, help students carry out the project.

Enrichment

- Create a group picture of a “dream site”—the project area with all students’ improvements made.
- Have students contact their state or local forestry office for information on school improvement projects using trees and shrubs.


READING CONNECTIONS

50 *Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*. Earthworks Press. 1999. A practical and upbeat guide showing how individual actions can affect the planet. Grades 5-8. ISBN: 0836223012. 

Berry, Joy. *Every Kid's Guide to Saving the Earth*. Living Skills Press. 1992. Using everyday situations, this activity-filled title shows how children can develop habits and attitudes which will make their homes, neighborhoods, communities, and even their whole planet a better place in which to live. Grades K-5. ISBN: 1590930541.

Dee, Catherine. *Kid Heroes of the Environment*. Earthworks Press. 1991. Twenty-nine profiles of individuals and organizations who


worked at home, at school, locally, and nationally, to help the environment through “kid power.” Grades 3-8. ISBN: 1879682125.

Fleischman, Paul. *Seedfolks*. HarperCollins. 1999. One by one, a number of people of varying ages and backgrounds transform a trash-filled inner-city lot into a productive and beautiful garden, and in doing so, the gardeners are themselves transformed. Grades 7+. ISBN: 0064472078. 

Kurusa. *The Streets are Free*. Annick Press. 1985. A true story of the children of barrio San Jose de la Urbina (Venezuela) and how they organized their community to make a park. Grades 4-6. ISBN: 1550373706.

Lewis, Barbara A. *The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose—and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action*. Free Spirit Publishing. 1998.

A simple-to-follow guide to taking social action, this book contains practical tools (like sample petitions, letters, and press releases) as well as success stories. Grades 5+. ISBN: 1575420384.

Stetson, Emily & Cole Stone, Susan J. *Kids' Easy-to-Create Wildlife Habitats: For Small Spaces in City-Suburbs-Countryside*. Williamson Books. 2004. Shows children how to observe and support wildlife around their homes, schools, and communities. Children learn about the characteristics of different animals and qualities that make their habitats suitable for them. Grades 3-6. ISBN: 0824986652. 

 Available @ <http://shop.plt.org>



