

**TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM OF
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN ALABAMA**

DRAFT

**Observations and Recommendations
Based on Needs as Identified by the
Alabama Commission on Environmental Initiatives**

Submitted to
Governor Don Siegelman

by the
Alabama Commission on Environmental Initiatives

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Foreword

When Governor Siegelman appointed sixty-three members to create one of the largest commissions in the history of Alabama, no one knew what the outcomes would be. From an initial swarm of nearly 200 environmental initiatives, some good ideas have emerged, and they have done so with a new sense of organization and pragmatism. The need to improve opportunities for environmental education in Alabama was clearly at the top of the list.

Environmental education is considered to be an area of paramount importance that affects all aspects of environmental quality and the quality of life in Alabama communities. Therefore, this report is devoted entirely to a discussion of Alabama's overdue need for a statewide Environmental Education Program.

The issue of environmental education has enjoyed the attention of many citizens in our state, but most have been frustrated by the difficulties of compromise and the lack of progress in developing a comprehensive plan. Through the tenacity of individuals and organizations, this plan is ready for implementation. It is offered as an intermediate step, with regard both to health concerns and education concerns, on the path to further planning for effective solutions to Alabama's environmental needs. In other words, it is anticipated that there will be ample future opportunity to expand or refine priorities and to improve upon recommended strategies. Many environmental needs and issues are complex and will require continued dialogue, assessment, and stakeholder collaboration if we are to ensure a quality future for our state.

—Dr. Doug Phillips, ACEI EE Committee Co-Chair
—Dr. Jeff McCollum, ACEI EE Committee Co-Chair
—W. Peter Conroy, ACEI Chair

I. Introduction

This report is submitted subsequent to the ACEI report to the Governor outlining statewide environmental concerns. Recommendations contained herein reflect the priorities developed by the Alabama Commission on Environmental Initiatives (ACEI) Committee on Health and Education.

Contents of this report are drawn from the experiences of a number of educators who have been active with environmental education in Alabama for several decades. These educators have participated in multiple efforts to promote environmental education and to build support for a comprehensive statewide environmental education program.

Such efforts have been very successful in establishing a host of environmental education organizations, resources, and materials in the state. Nevertheless, the challenge of developing a coordinated, comprehensive, statewide program has proven more difficult to achieve. The bad news is that environmental education in Alabama remains a fragmented mix of separate programs and activities that are reaching only a small percentage of Alabamians. However, the good news is that this problem has been acknowledged by an unprecedented collaboration of diverse interest groups who are now developing a framework for a planned and coordinated approach to addressing Alabama's unmet environmental education needs.

The purpose of this report is to assist the Governor and ACEI in achieving significant new progress in environmental education. Building on the advancement that has already been attained and enlisting the "common ground" of stakeholder collaboration are paramount in accomplishing this goal.

II. Background

The Governor's Alabama Commission on Environmental Initiatives is the latest and most promising of such executive commitments undertaken to examine the environmental needs of Alabama. An early initiative was begun by Governor George Wallace, who created the Alabama Environmental Quality Association (AEQA). AEQA's small staff operated for several years to help provide the public with environmental information about various topical issues of the time. More recently, Governor Jim Folsom, Jr., established an environmental advisory committee to explore the range of environmental problems and issues confronting Alabama. One of the aims of this committee was to identify environmental education needs in the state.

In 1988, leaders from business, government, citizen groups, and a host of state and local organizations convened for the first statewide Alabama Environmental Education Symposium. The Symposium was a result of many years of dialogue among these leaders, most of whom had become increasingly concerned about the status of environmental education in Alabama. A dominant concern stemmed from the fact that Alabama was sorely lacking in environmental education. The full proceedings of this Symposium are contained in a report entitled, *Toward a Comprehensive Program of Environmental Education in Alabama* (Center for Environmental Research and Service, Troy State University, 1988). This 1988 report was instrumental in a number of subsequent environmental developments:

- Formation of the Environmental Education Association of Alabama, an organization composed primarily of teachers and other educators interested in sharing ideas, information, and resources supportive of environmental education.

- Preparation of the landmark document, *An Environmental Protection Plan for the State of Alabama* (ADEM, 1989), which presents recommendations for increased environmental education in Alabama.
- The establishment of Legacy: Partners in Environmental Education, an organization born as an outgrowth of the above-mentioned 1989 Environmental Plan and operating in affiliation with ADEM to provide a variety of resources, training, and grant opportunities for environmental education.

The title of the Proceedings of the 1988 Symposium is borrowed as the title for the present report because many of the 1988 Symposium participants continue their collaboration and presently participate with ACEI in hopes that ACEI will make possible the implementation of a comprehensive program for environmental education in Alabama. Numerous observations about environmental education derived in 1988 remain relevant today. Such items are summarized below.

Problems Often Identified as Major Concerns Regarding Environmental Education in Alabama

- Countless arrays of environmental education materials have emerged over the years, but many are limited in their focus, and many are slanted by the perspective and special interests of sponsoring organizations.
- Alabama teachers have no coordinated assistance in evaluating and selecting quality, accurate, unbiased environmental education materials.
- In many educational situations, there has been an over-reliance on indoor teaching and a widespread lack of outdoor and field school opportunities.
- Environmental training appropriate for science teachers has been seriously lacking, and there have been few incentives for teachers to get such training.
- Existing environmental education programs are often not adaptable for multi-cultural groups or students with exceptionalities or special needs.
- K–12 education in Alabama incorporates no officially designated, substantive program for environmental education; the inclusion of environmental education materials in the classroom is entirely optional, and therefore infrequent in many classrooms.
- Many environmental education materials that are offered to teachers are not properly designed to augment the teaching of academic requirements, and therefore do not support the priorities of teachers (for whom time constraints and the other demands and realities of teaching typically prohibit inclusion of such optional materials).
- There is no state-designated environmental education program available in the teacher training divisions of Alabama's colleges and universities.
- There is no recommended, standardized, environmental education program available in the general/core curriculum of Alabama's colleges and universities.
- Most initiatives to provide environmental education to the general public are poorly funded and poorly promoted.
- Where environmental education has been celebrated in the local school or community, emphasis is often limited to topical concerns. The need for understanding such important and fundamental aspects as the natural history and diversity of the native landscape, environmental science, and the complexities of environmental management have been neglected.

- A persistent problem in Alabama has been the difficulty of achieving an understanding that environmental education is a legitimate priority of “basic education” and when done correctly provides a superior *process* for hands-on learning to support the attainment of many required academic standards.
- Despite successful environmental education programs elsewhere across the nation, the message of the broader values of environmental education seems not to reach key policy-setting levels for education in Alabama.
- Because of the above problems, the majority of Alabama’s children, college students, teachers, and general citizenry receive very little substantive environmental education.
- Without a thoughtful statewide plan and program for environmental education, Alabama is at increasing risk of suffering environmentally and economically. The long-term quality of life in Alabama depends upon informed decision-making and responsible public support for policies and practices that ensure a healthy environment and a sustainable economy.

Major Priorities Often Identified for Improving Environmental Education in Alabama

- An encompassing priority is for development and implementation of a comprehensive statewide program of environmental education, emphasizing hands-on learning—a program that addresses prevailing obstacles to environmental education and that meets the multiple environmental education needs for schools, communities, and the general public.
- The development of a comprehensive statewide program should coordinate with and draw upon existing quality programs and resources in order to avoid “reinventing the wheel” and related duplication of effort/expenditures.
- A statewide comprehensive program for environmental education should identify needs/areas for which effective educational resources/programs do not already exist and should follow a systematic, coordinated approach to resolving these needs.
- A statewide program for environmental education should be formulated through the collaborative involvement of all stakeholder groups (citizens, business, local, state and federal government, environmental groups, educators, landowners, scientists, regulators, sportsmen, recreationists, etc.) and modeled on established national standards for environmental education and environmental literacy.
- A statewide, comprehensive program for environmental education in Alabama should include a specially designated liaison to the Governor charged specifically with assisting in the implementation of statewide environmental education program components.

Culminating Consensus for Action to Address Environmental Education Needs and Priorities in Alabama

- Stakeholder cooperation has proven crucial to progress for environmental education in Alabama. Historically, the failure to find “common ground” on matters of environmental education in the state is largely attributable to the absence of an effective means of building consensus support. However, over the years - with the emergence of new environmental education organizations, expanded networking, and increased dialogue - diverse interest groups have come to more readily recognize a shared, mutual concern for effective education and protection for Alabama’s environment.

- In recent years, a growing number of teachers have voiced a shared concern that Alabama schools need to implement a coordinated, systematic program of environmental education that is endorsed by the state and supportive of the required academic regimen.
- Recently, Alabama business leaders have increasingly expressed a joint interest for greater public understanding and support for environmental measures needed to sustain statewide economic vitality.
- Throughout the years, the citizens of Alabama have articulated a common desire for improved appreciation and protection of the state's natural features and environmental resources. They deem these features as essential to maintaining a high quality of living.
- In recent years, the persistent efforts of committed educators have culminated in the successful cooperation of diverse stakeholders in establishing the Alabama Collaborative for Environmental Education (ACEE). This Collaborative has placed special emphasis on developing mutual understanding and trust among different interest groups. The Collaborative acknowledges that Alabama's environment must be protected and sustained with the active participation of citizens, businesses, landowners, farmers, and the many others contributive to the state's economic well-being. Involving such diverse interests, the Collaborative has taken several major steps in reviewing national standards for environmental education, surveying successful environmental education programs in other states, developing a model environmental education program for Alabama schools, and formulating the basis for a broadly-supported environmental education plan for Alabama.
- Members of the **Alabama Collaborative for Environmental Education** have worked closely with the ACEI Health and Education Committee in reviewing the status and progress of environmental education in the state and in developing this Committee's earlier report, *An Initial Listing of Priorities for Health and Environmental Education in Alabama*.

III. Guiding Principles for Development and Implementation of Environmental Education in Alabama

In preparing recommendations for this report, ACEI members surveyed existing national standards for environmental education and invited input from diverse interest groups statewide. Subsequently, the commission drafted the following basic principles to guide the development and implementation of environmental education in Alabama.

1. Definition of Environmental Education

Environmental education is defined as the educational process dealing with the scientific, cultural, ecological, and economic relationships of humans to their natural and artificial surroundings. It includes the complex relationships of pollution, resource allocation, conservation, transportation, and technology in the environment.

Environmental education in Alabama is a process that aims to equip the people of Alabama with a basic understanding of ecological principles, environmental resources, and the environmental sciences so as to enable them to compete economically and make well-informed choices concerning the environment.

To be effective, environmental education programs must be factual, balanced, and focused on helping students and the general public understand the scientific concepts which impact environmental issues. These programs should increase environmental awareness and appreciation of Alabama's environmental resources, promote knowledge of environmental

concepts, develop basic environmental skills, and encourage personal responsibility and stewardship.

2. Basic Ground Rules for Environmental Education Programs

- All environmental education programs used in the K–12 curriculum should be consistent with the definition of environmental education set forth in this plan.
- All environmental education programs should be conducted in a balanced manner, based on current scientific information, and presented in a fair and accurate manner utilizing standards set forth in “Environmental Education Materials Guidelines for Excellence” (North American Association for Environmental Education, November, 1996).
- School use of environmental education programs should consist of emphasizing concepts, principles, and content appropriate for the selected grade level(s).
- School programs for environmental education should strive to utilize existing environmental education resources, meet the requirements of the Alabama Course of Study, and reinforce fundamental course requirements.
- Environmental education programs should focus on providing tools with which responsible decisions can be made. Programs should not direct learners toward any biased or single interest group perspective or action.
- Environmental education at all levels is encouraged to emphasize opportunities for outdoor education, hands-on learning, and environmental improvement projects.

IV. Recommendations for Consideration by the Governor’s Commission on Environmental Initiatives

The recent progress in statewide support for improved environmental education provides a timely opportunity for Alabama. Many key ingredients are presently in place to help the state establish a comprehensive model program for environmental education that is responsive to the needs of schools, communities, and the general public. Toward such a comprehensive program, recommendations are offered below.

1. Establish the framework to complete and implement the ACEI Environmental Education Plan.

Objective: Provide for Alabama a broadly supported comprehensive plan for environmental education through the continued collaboration of diverse interest groups to include appropriate representation from state agencies, businesses, and citizen groups.

Explanation: The numerous separate environmental education projects and programs that exist in the state are to be applauded and supported. However, many of Alabama’s major environmental education needs—especially the overriding need for a comprehensive statewide program—can best be met through collaborative planning that involves all stakeholder groups in a thoughtful process of cooperation, assessment, and consensus-building. Consensus support can thereby enable state leaders to better enact needed policies and programs.

Actions:

- Adopt the Guiding Principles for Development and Implementation of Environmental Education in Alabama (Section III of this document).
- Establish a state Environmental Education Teacher/Academic Advisory Committee.
- Establish a state Environmental Education Executive/Policy Committee.
- Establish a state Environmental Education Liaison position to work with ACEI and the proposed Committees in implementing needed policies and programs for environmental education.

2. Correlate Environmental Education materials and programs with State K-12 Curriculum Requirements

Objective: Formally establish a model, state-supported program that is interdisciplinary in scope and that integrates environmental education with the objectives of academic subject areas in the required curriculum.

Explanation: Teachers want environmental education activities that support required curriculum objectives. Correlating environmental education activities with the Alabama Course of Study will ensure that teachers are able to regularly include environmental education in their instructional programs.

Actions:

- Identify gaps in available environmental education programs and fill them.
- Maintain a current index of environmental education materials correlated with Alabama curriculum objectives, (remembering such issues as human health, multi-cultural differences, and the need for outdoor education).
- Assemble approved correlated materials into a sequential, subject-integrated format providing an organized program for environmental education that draws upon quality existing resources.
- Disseminate and promote approved programs. Expand awareness and access through telecommunications, clearinghouses, newsletters, conferences, and the efforts of cooperating agencies and organizations.
- Develop teacher training in multi-cultural environmental education and linkages between the environment and public health.
- Provide more in-service training for outdoor, hands-on environmental education and public health issues, to include training in strategies for action learning (i.e., clean a creek, recycle, etc.).
- Provide additional incentives for teachers to get environmental training (ex., free college courses).
- Publicly recognize and reward educators who complete training certification or professional development in environmental education.
- Promote approved environmental education experiences and internships offered by colleges, universities, nature centers, and other organizations. Stress content blended with methodology. Include programs and instruction for integrating environmental education into all curriculum areas.

- Develop financial and administrative support for the professional development of educators, and for the incorporation of environmental education into the required curriculum and daily experiences of students.
- Recognize schools, field programs, and school systems that serve as models for promoting environmental education and that have significant teacher participation in professional development programs for environmental education.
- Improve communications to inform educators of professional development opportunities in environmental education. Include distance learning, videos, and other methods to assist those in remote and under-served areas.

3. Enhance Environmental Education for the General Public

Objective: Identify and support existing environmental education programs for the public and promote initiatives to ensure an environmental ethic among Alabamians.

Explanation: Education of the adult population is a critical challenge but is necessary to instill a conservation ethic and sense of stewardship in Alabama communities.

Actions:

- Inventory Alabama environmental education programs for adults and promote them through the Environmental Education Clearinghouse and other means.
- Promote partnerships between the public and private sectors to provide adult environmental education programs, initiatives, and community outreach.
- Encourage the development of environmental education programs to include business and community leaders.
- Encourage the development of environmental education programs for the general public that pair adults with children and that reach persons with exceptionalities.
- Promote the use of the arts as environmental education teaching media for families.
- Support and promote existing educational programs that can reach large public audiences in helping to raise awareness and appreciation for Alabama's natural qualities and resources.

4. Enhance Environmental Education Training for Teachers

Objective: Provide formal environmental education training programs/components for pre-service and in-service teachers. Generally enhance opportunities for teachers to acquire environmental education oriented toward enhancing the learning of academic content and use of effective teaching tools/methods.

Explanation: Teachers benefit from gaining essential environmental information together with strengthened academic content and effective teaching skills. Teachers who have been introduced to hands-on, experiential skills in the out-of-doors will be inclined to bring environmental education to their schools. Teachers who are comfortable teaching environmental education are likely to seek further professional development in environmental education.

Actions:

- Maintain a directory of pre-service environmental education programs and course offerings that incorporate environmental topics; identify appropriate departmental contacts on each campus.
- Support statewide gatherings bringing together college and university faculty, curriculum specialists, K–12 teachers and curriculum coordinators, museum and science center educators, and representatives of government and private organizations interested in environmental education.
- Provide additional instructional components for pre-service academic courses and instructional methods courses for the elementary and secondary levels to include the following: environmental topics and classroom curricula; hands-on and inquiry-based learning opportunities; use of local environmental and community resources; multi-cultural environmental education; field trip experiences; interdisciplinary environmental themes including social studies, science, mathematics, and the arts; and linkages with public health.
- Develop additional partnership efforts among colleges and universities, environmental education centers, business and industry, and government to include teacher internships.
- Investigate the establishment of bachelor’s and master’s degree environmental education programs. Encourage institutions of higher education with existing programs in environmental studies to share successes and expand opportunities.

5. Include Environmental Education in Higher Education

Objective: Inclusion of environmental education, where appropriate, in Alabama institutions of higher education.

Explanation: Just as environmental education should be integrated into K–12 coursework, it should be included in community college, college, and university coursework. Quality of life at home and at work can benefit from a basic understanding of ecological concepts and the interrelationships between human society and environmental resources.

Actions:

- Support inquiry-based instruction in environmental studies at all levels of higher education.
- Emphasize interdisciplinary content in environmental studies courses.
- Encourage institutions of higher education to improve their environmental education offerings for all students.
- Provide institutions of higher education with information about environmental resources available to them from state agencies, environmental education centers, and other services.

6. Establish an Alabama Environmental Education Clearinghouse

Objective: Provide information about environmental education to students, parents, and educators from kindergarten through college as well as to business, industry, and communities across the state.

Explanation: A central clearinghouse for environmental education would do much to correct the present situation in which Alabama citizens and educators encounter environmental information in piecemeal and fragmented fashion.

Actions:

- Develop and maintain an Alabama Environmental Education Clearinghouse to serve educators, students, parents, and others with questions, problems, or solutions related to environmental education.
- Employ methods of electronic communication - as well as more traditional means - to collect all appropriate environmental education information and to make this information readily accessible to citizens across the state.
- Collect and disseminate information about opportunities for environmental education internships, workshops, seminars, and funding.
- Assist Alabama's environmental education programs in sharing successes and opportunities with one another and with citizens interested in environmental education.

7. Enhance Utilization of Environmental Education Centers and Field Programs

Objective: Support existing environmental education centers and field programs in Alabama and develop additional programs as needed for regional access by schools and communities. Ensure communication among environmental education centers and field programs to identify needs and opportunities for coordinating programs to the mutual benefit of all.

Explanation: Alabama has many public and private environmental education centers serving a diverse statewide audience. Identifying and coordinating centers and field programs, addressing their needs and opportunities, ensuring communication among them, and coordinating their educational resources with the needs of the general public will further their missions. Promoting these programs will subsequently enhance the availability of valuable environmental education resources to schools and the general public.

Actions:

- Promote development of more field environmental education programs that are accessible throughout the state.
- Support and promote the creation of a state association of environmental education centers and field programs.
- Evaluate opportunities to incorporate residential experiences and the uses of technology to enhance environmental education.
- Explore the establishment of standards and accreditation for environmental education centers and field programs.
- Facilitate communication networking and sharing of information among environmental education centers, field programs, schools, and the general public.
- Promote development of more outdoor classrooms for hands-on learning in or near school grounds.
- Develop funding and administration support for field trips, site visits, internships, and volunteer programs.
- Publish and maintain a guide to environmental education centers and field resources in Alabama.

- Integrate environmental education centers and field programs into interdisciplinary school curricula.
- Develop a greater awareness to promote centers and field programs.

8. Provide Environmental Education for Governmental and Community Officials

Objective: Achieve appropriate environmental awareness and understanding among key decision-makers in government agencies and community leadership positions.

Explanation: Most state and community officials hold positions that, in one way or another, are related to the environment. It would benefit all such officials to have an improved knowledge of environmental concepts and environmental education resources. This would help them better understand environmental issues and relate to the various public audiences with whom they must interact.

Actions:

- Explore cooperative agreements with departments and divisions of state government to incorporate environmental education principles and concepts into the training of both new and existing employees.
- Develop experiential environmental education workshops for key officials who regularly interact with the public.
- Develop educational programs for community leaders and government employees to improve understanding of emerging environmental issues.
- Encourage voluntary leadership and service by key officials to promote environmental stewardship. Develop training assistance for volunteer leaders.
- Support existing environmental education programs that train public officials and expand them to teach the general public.

9. Encourage Media Participation in Environmental Education

Objective: Increase and improve means of providing environmental information to the media in Alabama.

Explanation: The media are an essential resource in effectively collecting and sharing information about environmental education and stewardship with the public.

Actions:

- Develop relationships with the media in order to better provide them with environmental education information.
- Recognize exemplary media programs and coverage of environmental education activities and information. Promote/disseminate these effective programs and media efforts to expand the reach of environmental education.
- Improve the ability of environmental staff and educators in the public and private sectors to work collaboratively with the media.

- Plan educational opportunities and develop environmental education programs about emerging environmental matters with the media and the public.

10. Promote Environmental Education Library Collections

Objective: Develop bibliographies and provide approved resource materials to schools and community libraries and environmental education centers. Provide additional support through grants, resource information, and technical assistance.

Explanation: The availability of environmental education resource materials and tools in a variety of settings—including school media centers, public libraries, and environmental education centers—will reinforce teacher training programs available throughout the state. Bibliographies should be selected by a variety of professional educators who can identify resources that will reinforce training experiences and enhance inquiry-based learning experiences for students.

Actions:

- Offer grants to support environmental education library collections.
- Place additional emphasis on providing adult education materials and resources.
- Support environmental education library collection development and expansion through cooperative efforts among government agencies, industry, and other organizations.
- Include appropriate materials developed by these collaborators in recommended bibliographies and collections.
- Expand awareness of environmental education resources through telecommunications, clearinghouses, newsletters, and conferences.
- Investigate mobile environmental education library collections and interlibrary loan options.
- Promote and demonstrate new information technologies that expand the capabilities of teachers and students to search for and acquire environmental education resources.

11. Use Alabama Data to Enrich Environmental Education and Add Local Relevance for Citizens and Students

Objective: Build the capacity to access environmental data from sources in the state.

Explanation: An abundance of environmental data about Alabama is collected by state, federal, and local agencies. Ready access to this environmental information would do much to stimulate enthusiastic exploration and learning with greater meaningfulness and local relevance for students.

Actions:

- Work with master teachers to develop and pilot K–16 classroom applications for greater use of Alabama environmental data/information.
- Develop and promote collaborative programs between students and local governments for using Alabama data to explore real-world problems and help create solutions.
- Support and promote existing educational resources.

- Involve students in environmental monitoring and restoration projects to integrate learning with community-based efforts.
- Recognize communities, schools, businesses, government officials, citizens, and citizen groups that demonstrate environmental stewardship.

12. Expand Funding for Environmental Education

Objective: Establish additional means of funding, including development of an Environmental Education Trust Fund, to encourage and support environmental education.

Explanation: A lack of financial support to access existing environmental education resources is a major barrier for teachers and citizens. There is a statewide need for funding for environmental education materials and supplies, professional staff development, class activities, technology, and better use of existing facilities and resources.

- Establish a special committee to explore potential means of expanding funding (options/possibilities for increased funding) for environmental education.