Environmental literacy training

In Vermont, public dialogues envision environmental literacy.

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Environmental issues are of critical concern in the 21st century. In the coming decades, the public — youth and adults alike — will more frequently be called upon to understand complex environmental issues, recognize how individual decisions affect the environment and evaluate proposed solutions.

All sorts of Vermont businesses, organizations and communities are already incorporating a variety of innovative environmental programs and education initiatives in their practices.

Consider these examples:

I To promote the connections between environmental and human health, Rutland Regional Medical Center and the Rutland Area Visiting Nurses and Hospice participate in the Workplace Farm Delivery Program through the Rutland Area Farm and Food Link.

I Over 1,500 parents and community members volunteering in the Four Winds Nature Program spend time each month leading natural science workshops that bring elementary children outside to explore nearby nature.

I Central Vermont Public Service Corporation is developing a new Clean Energy Education Center in Rutland City showcasing the new array of 266 solar panels across the street from the Glen Station hydroelectric facility.

I Charles Slackleton’s asked table project brings landowners, foresters, loggers, and furniture makers and owners together in a celebration of locally grown and produced furniture.

This winter, Vermont’s Statewide Environmental Education Programs alliance (SWEEP) is hosting fourteen Environmental Literacy dialogues (one in each county) around the state. This public conversation on environmental literacy is an opportunity to share information about successful environmental efforts, in businesses, organizations and communities all over Vermont and to hear what others are doing.

Environmental literacy is part of the history and tradition of Vermont, where we are part of a closely linked web of natural, social and economic systems. Our livelihoods and our livelihoods are shaped by this working landscape. Environmental literacy includes knowledge of the Earth as a physical and a living system. It involves the ability to think creatively and critically to develop solutions together, and it requires an understanding that what we do as individuals and groups can make a difference.

According to the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation, 95 percent of the public supports environmental education in our schools (see the foundation’s report “Environmental Literacy in America: What Ten Years of NEEFT Royer Research and Related Studies Say about Environmental Literacy in the U.S.”).

Here in Vermont, teachers in many K-12 schools are integrating science and social studies, math and writing in lessons actively involving students in examining locally relevant environmental issues. At Sharon Academy, high school students are investigating forest ecosystem health on land owned by the school. And a group of middle school students at Barlow Memorial School helped build a nature trail system and outdoor classroom for the community. Our colleges as well are engaged in this work — from the new “ecodorm” at Sterling College to Middlebury College’s Edward T. Woodruff Colloquium Series to the Teaching Gardens at St. Michael’s College and many others.

Beyond formal education, SWEEP recognizes that increasing environmental literacy is a lifelong goal that may be part of workforce development, on-the-job training, or entrepreneurial enterprises as we look to new technologies and business strategies to strengthen our economy and our communities.

According to dialogue participants, this opportunity is evident in the growth in interest in renewable energy systems and new heating technologies, in sustainable agriculture and green building design and construction projects, in alternative transportation options, and in social networking sites like Facebook and GoVermont.

Funded by a grant from the Canaday Family Charitable Trust to the Four Winds Nature Institute in partnership with SWEEP, this Environmental Literacy for Vermont project is designed to gather stories about current environmental practices and projects in Vermont communities to help draft a road map to environmental literacy. Our hope is that everyone attending will leave with some ideas to take back to their workplace or community. The resulting report will identify opportunities for different sectors in Vermont’s communities to assist in increasing environmental literacy and will outline action steps and identify resources to help meet these shared goals.

For more information about this project and upcoming dialogue dates and sites, visit www.environmentalliteracyvt.org. We continue to schedule dialogue dates and sites, so keep checking for updates.

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