

What we Heard: Findings from Consultations on Youth Environmental Engagement in Alberta

About the consultation process

In December 2007 the Alberta Emerald Foundation retained the services of two groups - the Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE) and Action Consulting, to conduct research on youth environmental engagement in Alberta. The research included these processes:

1. **Backgrounder.** Creation of a draft document entitled 'Backgrounder on Youth Environmental Engagement in Alberta'. This document was circulated widely, and a final version produced based on feedback from over 60 stakeholders.
2. **Interviews.** The team identified and interviewed 11 key stakeholders. Interview findings are included in a separate document.
3. **Stakeholder recruitment.** ACEE identified over 100 key stakeholders, and contacted these groups individually, inviting them to review the backgrounder and attend a consultation meeting (or fill out a survey if unable to attend a meeting). ACEE also circulated a similar invitation to 760 environmental education stakeholder groups and individuals through its EE Groups listserve.
4. **Surveys.** There were 19 respondents to the on-line survey. Survey findings are included in a separate document.
5. **Consultation meetings.** Two meetings were held on February 25 and 26, 2008 in Calgary and Edmonton. Meetings were attended by a total of 55 stakeholders (participants list is appended), ran from 12:00 to 4:00pm, and included lunch. Participants, on average, gave the event an approval rating of 7.5 out of 10, and thought the gatherings were well-facilitated and held value for them. They cited networking, the backgrounder, 'dotmocracy' ranking activity, and the diverse cross-section of participants as elements they particularly enjoyed.

A vision for youth environmental engagement in Alberta

At the February 2008 workshops convened by the Alberta Emerald Foundation, over 50 stakeholders collaboratively generated elements of a vision for the future of Alberta with respect to youth environmental engagement. Stakeholders were asked to look three years ahead and describe the state of youth environmental engagement, having achieved goals pertaining to their work, and in general. Below is a description that attempts to capture the essence of a shared vision for Alberta.

In the future ...

Youth from a wide variety of ages, socio-economic circumstances, and rural and urban settings are engaged. The ways in which youth are engaged, from youth-led organizations to peer-to-peer teaching modalities, are as diverse as youth themselves. Youth have abundant opportunities to explore the natural environment from an early age. They are deeply engaged in active stewardship of both working landscapes and protected areas, of issues pertaining to air, land, and water, and are informed by an understanding of the connection between environmental and social justice issues, and the crucial links between environment, society, and economy. This important work by youth is integrated with the work of their communities, and youth work shoulder to shoulder with adults who are not just mentors, but allies in environmental protection. Culturally, environmental engagement has become cool among youth, and action to change the world for the better has become the new norm.

How are these youth supported? A wide variety of groups, from non-governmental organizations to schools and businesses, work together in a synergistic and seamless manner to support youth. These stakeholders convene regularly and communicate well to ensure that both the well-trained program staff and abundant volunteers work together efficiently and create a variety of exciting opportunities for youth engagement. A dynamic network of regular conferences, youth summits, and other meetings ensure that both youth and those who provide youth engagement opportunities are well-connected. Collaborative initiatives have arisen, such as a sector-wide communication and marketing strategy that ensures all Alberta youth are aware of the myriad of opportunities to be involved in environmental stewardship, both as a volunteer in an organization and as a career. A common vision of engaged youth has created a seamless and synergistic relationship between formal and non-formal education groups, and schools help deliver on this vision with new curriculum and dynamic teacher training programs that provide new opportunities for student-led environmental projects. Teachers support and are supported in these initiatives.

Stakeholders understand and use the best practices of youth engagement: programs promote environmental literacy, are relevant and meaningful to youth, encourage critical thinking, offer experiential learning, include training and application of action skills, are inclusive, nurture relationships between nature and people, walk the talk, and invest sufficient time in youth to ensure their long-term engagement. Youth are engaged within organizations, and their opinions are heard and help steer the development of both organization and programs. Organizations respect youth opinion, and listen to youth advice: for example, groups readily use youth-friendly technologies such as on-line social networking to support youth environmental engagement.

And what of the larger context in which all this work takes place? Alberta society itself has seen dramatic increases in environmental literacy: environmental awareness and support for the environment have increased, skills and values pertaining to protecting the environment are embraced, and the notion of environmental sustainability as core business has permeated every social structure, from schools to industries. Alberta culture has generated a positive, can-do attitude towards the environment, celebrates youth environmental engagement in a number of ways, and provides incentives, grants, and awards to supplement the intrinsic motivation already felt by youth. Youth leadership is a well-respected and politically accepted force. The natural environment itself benefits from this enhanced understanding and practice of stewardship. For example, the ecosystem services that provide clear air and fresh water are healthy, and a matrix of protected areas assures a wide range of both wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities for all Albertans.

Barriers and Gaps – Themes from Workshops

Stakeholders were asked to brainstorm and discuss the major barriers and existing gaps in youth environmental engagement in Alberta. The following are the major themes that emerged from both Calgary and Edmonton meetings.

Collaboration, Networking, and Partnerships

- lack of knowledge of other groups and potential partnerships
- competition and conflict between groups
- not enough networking opportunities
- not enough collaboration between organizations
- lack of student conferences
- lack of spots for youth at “adult” conferences
- not enough knowledge sharing
- lack of connections between organizations’ programming

Communications and Marketing

- lack of communication about programs to audiences
- lack of clearinghouse or hub of available resources and opportunities
- insufficient use of technology to reach youth audience
- ineffective marketing
- lack of good “hooks”

Funding

- lack of sustainable funding
- lack of adequate funding for staff
- grant programs seldom accompanied with mentorship and support
- competition between groups for funding

Celebration and Reward

- not enough celebration of results and success
- lack of financial incentives or rewards for youth
- not enough rewards for our work

Experiential and Action-oriented Opportunities

- not enough experiential opportunities
- not enough action oriented opportunities
- lack of deep and meaningful, high quality experiences
- not able to run field trips because of liability concerns
- lack of emphasis on skill building, especially action skills
- not enough environmentally focused camp programs

- lack of environmental apprenticeships (not reaching non-academic youth in workforce)
- lack of environmental internships
- not enough project based learning
- lack of authentic, personally relevant experiences
- lack of opportunities to experience nature
- not enough focus on behavioural outcomes

Mentorship and Leadership

- lack of mentorship training for program staff
- need youth leaders in schools to motivate other youth
- need more youth mentoring youth, ex. older mentoring younger
- potential mentors may not recognize opportunities
- potential mentors do not have time
- teachers are not always mentors

Formal Education

- high school curriculum is dated
- no outdoor/environmental education in curriculum
- need better K -12 involvement
- need better teacher support
- curriculum is missing many elements of youth engagement (esp. high school)
- lack of support for environmental clubs
- not enough resources (esp. technology related)
- not enough time for teachers
- school not linked to community
- environmental learning not a priority in curriculum

Cultural and Political Context

- consumer culture huge challenge
- our culture is not connected to nature
- environmental advocacy is not "cool"
- gap between urban vs. rural perspectives/ethics
- generational differences and misunderstanding
- Alberta culture does not embrace environmental stewardship
- we are stuck in "old ways" of thinking
- lack of political support
- youth are not viewed as leaders and decision makers in society
- inadequate intrinsic motivation to act
- youth often disconnected from community

Organizational Capacity and Concerns

- lack of capacity to explore funding and programming opportunities

- lack of succession planning
- dealing with 'burn out'
- lack of ability and resources to assess results and success
- fear to take leadership (because issues are controversial in community)
- shortage of volunteers
- lack of adequate training of staff and volunteers
- too high of expectations for volunteers
- lack of time to guide/mentor youth
- no clear strategy on meaningful youth engagement
- hard to find good staff

Lack of On-going Initiatives and other Program Design Considerations

lack of on-going programming to sustain engagement
involvement is not long term
emphasis on short term outputs
many programs are 'one-offs'
significant gaps in adherence to high quality youth engagement theory and practice
not enough local (community/bioregional) focus
not reaching diverse geography of Alberta, especially rural communities
lack of connection between social justice and environment
lacking emphasis on critical thinking skills

Suggested Strategies and Initiatives: Building bridges over the barriers identified above

Participants at the consultation workshops worked individually to develop all of the following strategies, initiatives, and approaches to overcome the barrier and gaps identified earlier. They were invited to include an “actor,” “verb,” and “outcome” for each idea they offered. They then used a ‘dotmocracy’ technique to rank and prioritize these initiatives. This prioritization has been preserved below: initiatives appear in **decreasing** order of priority (i.e. each item #1 below is the top-ranked initiative in any given category).

The following acronyms are used below:

AEF – Alberta Emerald Foundation

ACEE – Alberta Council for Environmental Education

ECOS – Environmental Coordination Office of Students (U of A)

Collaboration, Networking, and Partnerships

1. ACEE or others working in partnership could host a youth summit (help link youth with organizations, make it annual, make it national, make it affordable/free)
2. AEF could act as umbrella organization to aid in collaboration and sharing of resources and provide online database of activities and agencies [*please note this is a core role of ACEE*]
3. AEF and others could work with organizations to integrate social justice into environment theme, and reach a greater diversity of youth (ex. marginalized youth, youth with disabilities)
4. All groups work together to create networking opportunities for youth and program leaders (conferences, online discussion forums for youth, message boards)
5. AEF or ACEE could establish regional approach to support engagement and recognition in under-served areas (ex. establish regional youth advisory committees)
6. Utilize Volunteer Calgary (or other) to build network of volunteer opportunities and create youth leadership model
7. Non-formal and formal educators work together to create environmental curriculum and share resources and knowledge
8. Link youth committees from different organizations and government together
9. All groups to offer support to “Envirothon” to create excitement regarding EE
10. Government and ENGOs work together to create affordable outdoor education programs
11. Alberta Agriculture and Food to collaborate with other departments to support youth environmental engagement

12. University of Calgary to act as resource on sustainability for community
13. Taking It Global can enhance collaboration using online network
14. Alberta's Youth Volunteer can share local opportunities with youth and link them with organizations

Communications and Marketing

1. Use more youth-friendly forms of media (ex. technology; Now Communication Media)
2. Use media to effectively share success stories, state positions, and frame issues appropriate to public
3. Alberta Environment could incorporate a youth-oriented social marketing campaign
4. ACEE could maintain list of organizations for provincial communications
5. AEF could create an ambassador program to promote engagement and awards
6. Host more workshops and conferences
7. Alberta Government could produce a weekly environmental vignette that shows during popular youth programs
8. Alberta Agriculture and Food could promote AEF awards through Agriculture Ambassador network
9. Taking It Global could promote youth volunteerism through media
10. Alberta Environment could improve communications and promotions

Funding

1. AEF (or others) could provide funding for program operations
2. Provincial and municipal governments to dedicate funding to youth engagement and initiatives
3. AEF could offer scholarships and others could subsidize youth to attend leadership programs and conferences
4. AEF could provide funding for youth interns
5. Organizations to cost share (ex materials and services)
6. AEF could provide funding and networking support for groups reaching rural areas
7. Alberta Arts and Culture could create funding for student led initiatives
8. Funders to allocate money to collaborative initiatives
9. Funders to provide support for volunteer based organizations
10. ACEE could identify funders
11. ECOS could secure more resources to expand programs

Celebration and Reward

1. AEF could build comprehensive recognition program that goes beyond awards to bring visibility and profile to youth environmental action (ex. award could be followed by conference or trip that brings youth together from around the province)

2. AEF could create scholarship for youth to participate in youth leadership programs and/or work with environmental organizations, internships
3. AEF could host gatherings to profile success stories, resources, collaborative initiatives (ex. host a non-traditional conference, youth planned conference that is fun and relevant)
4. AEF could work in partnership with Active Citizens Television (or Access TV) to document and promote youth successes
5. Taking It Global can help recognize youth accomplishments by sharing best practices online
6. Get mainstream media to recognize, capture and share youth success stories; have a media spotlight to highlight an environmental initiative of the week (work with local media outlets)
7. Distribute award money to groups that can then give awards to groups and individuals
8. Alberta Agriculture and Food could celebrate our youth environmental engagement successes with our ambassador network
9. AEF could recognize teachers making a difference in EE

Experiential and Action-oriented Opportunities

1. Alberta needs some kind of youth environmental leadership institute. Pembina could share key learnings and the model used in its Bioregional Youth Leadership Program with an Alberta 'franchise' – or possibly roll it out in Alberta
2. Alberta Environment or ACEE could assist groups in the development and promotion of environmental monitoring programs that allow youth to become citizen scientists
3. ACEE could invite Earth Force to Alberta to workshop groups on how to do environmental service learning
4. Alberta Parks service can offer outdoor programming to urban youth at Fish Creek in Calgary, and thereafter at other sites
5. Alberta Environment or AEF could provide coaching and mentorship to high school students, who could then deliver programs to elementary students
6. ECOS (and other groups) could work to ensure that youth advisory committees help create policy within significant organizations

Mentorship and Leadership

1. Create a mentorship program where post-secondary students offer programming for junior and senior high schools (ex. ECOS could mentor students who wish to become involved in broader environmental community)
2. Alberta Environment could incorporate a mentoring component into ACT (Alberta Conservation Team)
3. AEF could create virtual mentor program using organizations from across Alberta

4. Alberta Parks could provide a mentor program to connect youth with employees
5. Long Lake Centre could provide year round stewardship mentorship in schools or youth groups
6. AEF could be central online database for mentorship opportunities
7. Leaders in environmental movement must model what they are advocating, and need more culturally diverse role models for youth
8. Parents need to set example for children

Formal Education

1. Alberta Learning must review and reform its core curriculum, beginning with social studies and science, to ensure that students become more environmental literate. This includes environmental sensitivity, ecological knowledge, critical thinking, and applying their knowledge through an environmental project; and includes placing more emphasis on experiential learning and connecting to the community, and less emphasis on memorizing content
2. The Alberta Teachers Association partner with other groups such as ACEE to provide support for classroom teachers who strive to be mentors and guides for student environmental action groups. This could take place through a summer workshop for teachers where they could do their planning and gather resources.
3. Mount Royal College (and other similar organizations, such as other colleges and universities) develops a mandatory first year "Sustainability 101" course for all undergraduate students so that all students graduate with a higher degree of environmental literacy
4. Alberta Education launches a special initiative to make high school science a better vehicle for student engagement, including a new emphasis on citizen science and monitoring programs
5. The Alberta Teachers Association and Alberta Education should develop a competitive 'Environmental Challenge' contest that schools enter, akin to the Provincial Geography challenge currently in place at the junior high level
6. Taking IT Global can help bring technology and virtual spaces into schools using the TIGed program
7. Albertas Youth VOLUNTEER program can support schools in engaging youth with 'Take Action' workshops
8. Industry could promote applied research: it could identify data gaps for universities and colleges to address, thereby creating real-world projects for students to address
9. AEF or another agency should meet with curriculum specialists and school board officials to promote awareness of the benefits of environmental education
10. Re-write key program materials in native languages (from Cree to Mandarin) to motivate these group
11. School boards or other agencies to resurrect the practice of family outdoor programs

Cultural and Political Context

1. Alberta Government could mandate youth engagement in policy consultation processes
2. Alberta Government could add EE into its policy
3. Better youth-adult communication could occur by creating a culture of inviting youth to speak at conferences and forums
4. AUMA could create youth council across Alberta
5. Introduce youth and environmental issues to upper management to help change "old ways of thinking"
6. Organizations across all sectors could create sustainability policies and action plans

Organizational Capacity and Concerns

1. AEF could convene and train groups interested in beginning a youth engagement program, and provide ongoing support and a venue for discussion for the coordinators of these programs
2. ACEE could develop a training model to help groups with exiting youth engagement programs to deepen their expertise and optimize their program.
3. Youth engagement programs need to be the property of an organization, not an individual.

Lack of On-going Initiatives and other Program Design Considerations

1. Groups should use logic models in their program design – and evaluate This might allow groups to emphasize the importance of achieving long-term outcomes over short-term outputs, and recognize the value of a longer-term investment in youth through their programs
2. AEF or ACEE should post and highlight the main principles of quality youth engagement, as outlined in the Backgrounder – including the notion of making the activities FUN for youth
3. All mainstream environmental organizations should commit to working authentically with youth, using the Hart's ladder of youth participation, to make their programs relevant to a diverse range of youth
4. Groups should make a practice of vetting new programs using focus groups and youth, to identify bias
5. Groups should work together to design a 'spiralling curriculum' that ensures that engagement opportunities are age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate
6. Groups that engage youth should work hard to attract and include young men, who tend to not get involved as much as young women
7. Inside Education could partner with other environmental education groups and support them in their efforts to reach remote and rural areas of Alberta.