

Nurturing a CONSERVATION ETHIC

One Classroom at a Time

BY Edith Pepper Goltra

Learning Landscape's Rob Wade has worked closely with Skagit Land Trust's Conservation Classroom program to achieve the goals of having outdoor learning spaces close to schools and supporting teachers who already have lessons in place. Pictured are Lyman Elementary kindergarteners having fun learning observation skills.

LISA MILLER

"The great aim of education is not knowledge but action."

—Herbert Spencer

WHENEVER POSSIBLE, NANCY SIPE BRINGS HER FIRST-GRADE STUDENTS OUTSIDE to what she calls the most amazing classroom of all: the Feather River Watershed. Thanks to the Learning Landscapes program—an innovative partnership between California's Plumas County Unified School District, the accredited Feather River Land Trust and several visionary landowners—Sipe has access to outdoor wooden benches, a nature trail, a forested ravine and the Leonhardt Ranch, which has a beautiful meadow across from the high school.

Learning Landscapes has been a transformational experience for students and teachers alike. "Our students like to refer to themselves as 'Mountain Kids,'" says Sipe, who teaches at the Quincy Elementary School. "It happens gradually, but by the time they are in the upper grades, they know many of the trees by name, and they can explain what a watershed is to the younger students. Our kids take pride in being Mountain Kids. They see this as a positive part of their identities. And the teachers take pride in being 'Mountain Teachers.'"

Launched in 2004, the Learning Landscapes program is unique for several reasons. First, each outdoor classroom is within a 10-minute walk from a school, which encourages teachers to use it as much as possible. Second, the program is geared toward educating and empowering all teachers to be environmental educators rather than relying on land trust staff for expertise. Regular professional training is offered as a way to instill confidence among teachers. The land trust provides each classroom with a field kit that contains field guides, binoculars, hand lenses and restoration tools, as well as some backpacks for easy traveling.

One of the main activities that students do in the Learning Landscapes setting is

field journaling. Sipe recalls how her 6- and 7-year-old students typically head outside with their journals in hand. They take time to look closely at the world around them. Then they begin drawing pictures and recording the things they notice. Their "wonderings" often lead them to do more research back at school. Rob Wade, Learning Landscapes program coordinator for the Feather River Land Trust, says field journaling "encourages students to deepen their exploration through observation and investigation and to think about their thinking."

"Learning Landscapes has made learning incredibly fun both for me and my students," says Bette Smith, a second-grade teacher at C. Roy Carmichael Elementary School. "The more I attend trainings and learn about my landscape, the more I incorporate these things into what we're doing in the classroom."

Teacher enthusiasm is the key to the program's success. "When teachers begin to feel comfortable and confident enough that they are 'independent users' of the land, then it's a sustainable program," says Wade. "There needs to be a heart and mind connection—a personal connection for teachers that leads to a professional one."

A Model Program

The self-sustaining nature of Learning Landscapes sets it apart from many other environmental education efforts that exist on a year-to-year basis. "If funding for the program from Feather River Land Trust dries up, Learning Landscapes will still be part of the schools," says Rob Aldrich, director of community conservation for the Land Trust Alliance. "The program is integrated into the school system—it's a true partnership."

Teachers and students have the daily opportunity to visit their outdoor classroom right

ROB WADE / FEATHER RIVER LAND TRUST



Children in the Learning Landscapes program learn to value the natural world on a deep, personal level.

on their campus or visit a forest, meadow or riparian/aquatic site adjacent to their school. The Feather River Land Trust has conserved these on- and off-campus sites for every school in the region. The 14 off-campus sites are situated on properties ranging from an acre to more than 1,000 acres. By providing students with repeated experiences in the outdoors, the program encourages kids to value the natural world on a deep, personal level.

Learning Landscapes has been evaluated by a team of California State University researchers for the past three years, and the results clearly demonstrate how best practices have led to program success. The proximity of the sites to schools and the autonomous use of them by teachers have resulted in an increase in the frequency of use. As students visit the sites more, the stronger their connection to—and care for—their environment becomes.

Communities from around the country have expressed an interest in the Learning Landscapes model. Wade has presented at the Land Trust Alliance's annual conference

Nurturing a CONSERVATION ETHIC



ELKHORN SLOUGH FOUNDATION

Over 100 students and teachers can fit under the 150-year-old oak tree at the Elkhorn Slough Foundation Outdoor Classroom. Trails lead to a variety of habitats for students to explore.



ELKHORN SLOUGH FOUNDATION

A second-grade student shares what he finds with a chaperone during an insect exploration at the Elkhorn Slough Foundation Outdoor Classroom.

(Rally) several times and has partnered with individual land trusts, suggesting ways that they could implement Learning Landscapes in their communities. For two accredited land trusts, the Elkhorn Slough Foundation and the Skagit Land Trust, Wade's advice translated into real-world changes on the ground.

Teaching What Land Does for Us

Last fall, California's Elkhorn Slough Foundation opened the Carneros Creek Outdoor Classroom, a learning space situated under the canopy of a magnificent 150-year-old oak tree. Similar to Learning Landscapes, this outdoor classroom is located within a five-minute walk of an elementary school.

One of the first events at the site was a Native American dance ceremony that drew 90 students, three teachers and 10 chaperones. Shortly thereafter, a group of second-graders began a "bug unit" at the site. "Students were able to use all of their senses to experience the environment," says Katie Pofahl, outreach coordinator for the Elkhorn Slough Foundation. "To see the brightness in their faces as they made discoveries was just incredible."

One of the most empowering aspects of this program is that fifth-grade students, who have been to the site and learned

the curriculum, are trained to lead the younger second graders on field exercises. The younger students look up to the fifth-graders, and the older students take pride in sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm.

Many of the kids who use the Carneros Creek Outdoor Classroom are from poorer farming families. They may have a connection to the land through farming, but an idea like land conservation, or an understanding of wild nature, may be foreign. Pofahl says, "We try to honor these perspectives and simply offer an alternative view of what land does for us and what it can mean."

The school has supported several "in-service" teacher trainings that involve bringing all of the school's teachers to the outdoor classroom, providing an orientation to the site and discussing habitats and broader ecosystem functions. It's important that teachers are given time on the land to plan their curriculum. Future trainings will focus on the NASA-sponsored Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment curriculum. This is a hands-on, international science and education program that gives teachers new skills and knowledge to strengthen their abilities as environmental educators.

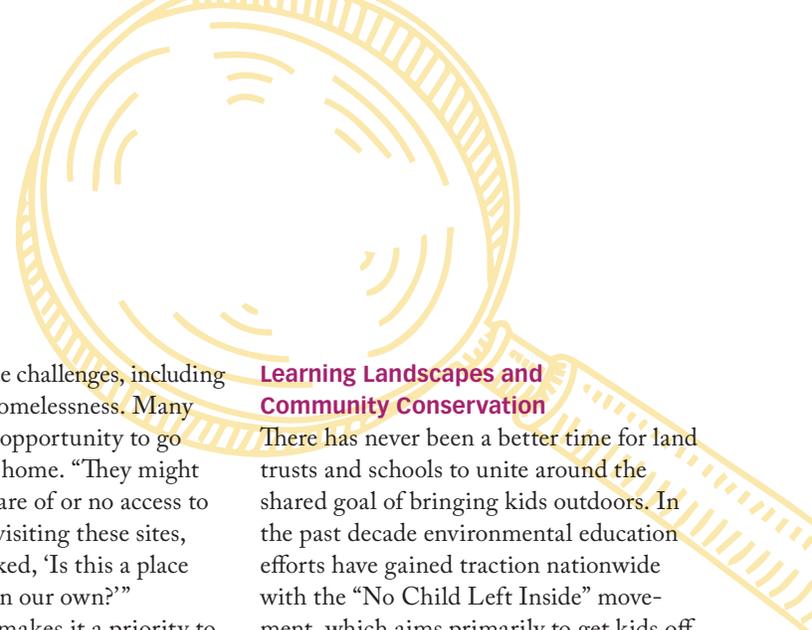
Elkhorn Slough Foundation staff and volunteers found that school officials welcomed

the concept of the outdoor classroom. "It was important that we laid out what we could offer the school while leaving room to make this program fit with their objectives," says Pofahl. "We were able to train teachers in use of the site and in curriculum options but also maintain flexibility. We didn't have a rigid vision. Our goal is to build support in our community for land conservation from the ground up."

Creating a Relationship to Land

Every two weeks, Carly Feiro, a teacher at Emerson High School in Mount Vernon, Washington, drives her students around in a van to different natural areas so that they can plant trees, remove invasive species, build fences and map properties. "It's about having a longer-term relationship with a site," says Feiro. "We can see our learning in action. We can watch how our restoration activities have a direct impact on the environment."

Feiro's program is supported by the Skagit Land Trust, which in 2013 officially incorporated the concept of connecting youth and nature into its strategic direction. The organization has since promoted a number of innovative projects, among them a Conservation Classroom program and an initiative that brings kids from



Latino and farmworker families out into nature on weekends.

Wade has worked closely with the Skagit Land Trust to refine its Conservation Classroom program. Similar to Learning Landscapes, the goal of Conservation Classroom is to have outdoor learning spaces that are close to schools and that can support teachers who already have lessons in place.

According to Lisa Miller, Skagit Land Trust's stewardship and outreach associate, "We say to the teachers and other educators, 'Bring your activities; bring your science, technology, engineering and math curriculum (STEM) or your Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). We will provide you a place to do it.'" Skagit Land Trust currently does not offer paid training for teachers, but Miller is working with each of the seven school districts in the county to change this. The land trust, however, does provide bus stipends to schools.

"Our high school students typically do not experience nature and many have never been in a wild area before," says Feiro. Emerson is an alternative high school for

students who experience challenges, including chronic poverty and homelessness. Many of them don't have an opportunity to go outside when they get home. "They might have siblings to take care of or no access to transportation. After visiting these sites, many of them have asked, 'Is this a place where we can return on our own?'"

Skagit Land Trust makes it a priority to help kids get out on the land. It has collaborated with Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Youth Program (in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the Mount Vernon Police Department, the North Cascades Institute and Catholic Housing Services of Western Washington) to host monthly outdoor excursions on Saturdays. The kids go by bus and perform stewardship activities, such as invasive species removal, and have time for exploration on a wide range of protected lands. According to Ranger Orlando Garcia, coordinator of the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Youth Program, "We are always looking for more ways to get good students outside and away from urban areas, pavement and nearby gang affiliation."

Learning Landscapes and Community Conservation

There has never been a better time for land trusts and schools to unite around the shared goal of bringing kids outdoors. In the past decade environmental education efforts have gained traction nationwide with the "No Child Left Inside" movement, which aims primarily to get kids off their devices and out into nature. Schools are making an increasing push for STEM training and many states have adopted NGSS—the real-world application of science and engineering—as part of the Common Core. Study and stewardship of the land is a natural fit, and every school is looking for partners and programs to help them to do that.

Land trusts have a clear opportunity to help schools provide this hands-on scientific learning, but the prospect of starting a program such as Learning Landscapes might seem daunting for some groups, particularly those that have had more of a transaction-based approach rather than a relationship-based approach. The key is to build slowly. "We started Learning Landscapes 13 years ago," says Wade. "It's been baby steps, but we have been able to create something that will endure."

"Many land trusts grasp the importance of community conservation and are looking for ideas on where to start," says Aldrich. "By modeling Learning Landscapes—this successful program—they can ease their way into community conservation."

In return, land trusts will benefit greatly from partnering with schools. Engaging in K–12 education is a way for land trusts to strengthen their connection with communities, gain a deeper and more enduring base of support and remain relevant in a changing world. Aldrich explains, "If today's students have the opportunity to go outside regularly to collect bugs, watch a bird in flight, identify an animal track or walk quietly through the woods, when they are leaders, they will choose to safeguard our natural world." 🍃

EDITH PEPPER GOLTRA IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO SAVING LAND.



LISA MILLER

Lyman Elementary School's kindergarten and fifth-grade partners record their findings during a Skagit Land Trust Conservation Classroom session.