

## **Talladega Open Air Classroom—A Cooperative Approach to Environmental Education**

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*Abstract:* In the fall and spring of each year, the Talladega National Forest becomes a classroom for second and fifth grade students. Students hike a 2-mile trail stopping at 6 to 7 learning stations. Students receive instruction on wildlife management, fisheries management, botany, forestry, fire prevention, litter control, and outdoor ethics. The program is a cooperative effort between the U.S. Forest Service, Talladega and Sylacauga school systems, the Alabama Forestry Commission, and the Pinecrest Garden Club. Since 1989, over 4,000 students have attended the Talladega Open Air Classroom. This hands-on concept of environmental education is well received by students, teachers, parents and community volunteers.

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Today's challenge in environmental science and education is that it must be "hands and minds on." Increasing the opportunity for teachable moments for young learners in the outdoors is not difficult. There are many natural areas near schools. To learn about and intrinsically value nature is to provide the opportunity for personal connections to nature. It is highly unlikely that instilling a sense of valuing our environment can ever be achieved by reading a book and filling out a work sheet. Environmental education must be experienced as a useful and engaging part of a students education. Providing a firsthand contextual experience is extremely important to young students in this process.

The Forest Service manages habitat to produce wildlife and fish; protect threatened, endangered, and sensitive species; and benefit all types of national forest users. Because of this mission, National Forest lands provide an excellent backdrop for "hands and minds on" environmental educational opportunities. Conservation education is vital to ecosystem management and sustained quality of the Forest Service's fish, wildlife, and forest resources.

We acknowledge the Pinecrest Garden Club whose cooperation and support was essential to the success of this program, the Alabama Forestry Com-

mission for providing instructors and material to students, and the Talladega and Sylacauga City School System administrators, teachers, students, and parents for their enthusiastic participation in this unique outdoor environmental education program.

## **Methods**

In 1989, the Pinecrest Garden Club approached the Talladega Ranger District, Talladega National Forest, Alabama, regarding environmental education for local city school students. The outdoor educational concept was initiated to include second and fifth grade students that would complement their classroom curriculum in the spring and fall of each year.

The setting for the Talladega Open Air Classroom is the Lake Chinnabee Recreation Area in the Talladega National Forest. Students are divided into groups and hike the 2-mile lakeshore trail loop. Usually 6 to 7 learning stations are placed along the trail where a wide variety of environmental topics are discussed. Each group stops for a 15-minute presentation on wildlife management, fisheries management, trees and timber management, botany, litter control, local forest history, and fire prevention.

At each learning station, presentations are made to students by the respective resource management professional (i.e., foresters, wildlife/fisheries biologists, botanists, archeologists, and forestry technicians). These resource professionals are provided by the U.S. Forest Service and the Alabama Forestry Commission. Special attention is given to utilizing interpretive tools which stimulate the students senses of sight, sound, touch, and smell at each learning station.

Members of the Pinecrest Garden club participate in the hike to and from the respective learning stations as chaperones and nature trail guides, encouraging students to observe everything from tadpoles to wildflowers.

## **Results**

The Open Air Classroom has been successful in providing a quality environmental educational experience for local city school students. The program has provided students, teachers and parents the opportunity to witness and understand the complex workings of nature in an atmosphere where the senses are stimulated. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators have an opportunity to take the learning and teaching experience to a higher dimension where nature is the teacher.

The program instills a sense of respect for the vast reservoirs of renewable natural resources found in our forests. Students are encouraged to work with nature in the conservation of those resources. They are exposed to the importance of trees and the forest in providing wood products, clean water, air, and healthy fish and wildlife populations.

To date, over 4,000 students from the Talladega City School System have attended the Talladega Open Air Classroom. The open air classroom is held

twice a year with second grade students attending in the spring and again in the fall in the fifth grade. This program has been incorporated into the second and fifth grade environmental science curriculum. In spring of 1994 the Sylacauga City School system was included in this outdoor educational program. The hopes are that the Talladega Outdoor Classroom will also be incorporated into the Sylacauga Elementary School environmental science curriculum.

In past years, due to strained financial resources in the local city school systems, local businesses, chambers of commerce, local industry, and private citizens have responded with financial donations to cover transportation costs to ensure the survival of what is considered a worthwhile program. The sense of community support has been overwhelming. This program is viewed as an important step in the protection and conservation of public and private forest lands.

In 1991, the Talladega Open Air Classroom was recognized nationally by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters by receiving the National Resource Conservation Education Award. In 1992 this program was the Take Pride in America Alabama State and National winner. In 1994, the Talladega Open Air Classroom was recognized as the Best Community Environmental Project in Alabama, by the Environmental Education Association of Alabama.

This concept of open air classroom has attracted the attention of the Interpretive Association in Alabama which has teamed up with the Conecuh National Forest in Alabama and initiated a similar outdoor environmental education program in 1993.

## Discussion

We are currently in an age where young students are influenced by television, videos, and electronic games. As environmental educators, we need to be creative and innovative if we are to be successful in making environmental education a powerful part of society's agenda for the 21st century. The Talladega Open Air Classroom is just one of many unique and creative ways to motivate administrators, teachers, and students to become exposed to connected issues and environmental problems, be they local or global. This program has been successful in providing an opportunity for young students to gain special insights to many natural wonders that a child can experience when exploring outdoors.

Today's youth will be tomorrow's environmental policy and decision makers. It is imperative to us, as resource managers and educators, that we continue to systematically and comprehensively enhance our approach to natural resource conservation and environmental education. By investing in today's youth, we are planting a seed that will ensure that future generations will develop the awareness, knowledge, and commitment that will result in informed decisions, responsible behavior, and constructive actions concerning wildlife and the environment.