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Groups across Vt. connect to plan for environmental awareness

By JEN BROWN Herald Correspondent - Published: November 29, 2009

This fall members of Vermont's Environmental Literacy Project Steering Committee met for the first time. With our dinners balanced precariously on our laps, we got down to business. During the round of introductions, a few people commented, "I'm not really sure what I'm doing here." But very soon it did become clear — we were there because we were all connected by our concern to increase environmental awareness in this state.

"Everything is Connected: Environmental Literacy for Vermont" is the title of a yearlong, grant-funded project led by the Four Winds Nature Institute in cooperation with Vermont's State-Wide Environmental Education Programs alliance. Everything is connected. It's a simple statement, a cliché. Yet it is a theme that we can't deny, and some of the connections are rather surprising.

Vermont's environmental literacy project continues this winter with a statewide public dialogue process highlighting successful environmental education and communication efforts across all sectors in the state and identifying existing needs and opportunities to increase environmental literacy in Vermont. The goal is to create a roadmap for environmental literacy throughout Vermont, including a pre-K–12 component that meets the requirements of proposed federal legislation, the No Child Left Inside Act of 2009.

Vermont's own Rep. Peter Welch and Sen. Bernard Sanders are cosponsors of the No Child Left Inside Act. Many other states also are working on environmental literacy plans, but they focus only on the pre-K–12 sectors of the states. The Vermont project recognizes that environmental literacy is a lifelong learning process that begins with parents, early childhood professionals, and young children; grows into K–12 formal and informal education; is integrated into higher education, technical education, businesses, government services, and the media; and involves whole communities. In Vermont we see that it really is all connected.

The word "environmental" first brings to mind the obvious connections in nature — the flower and the bee, the steep gorge and the glacier that carved it, the swelling river and the snowcapped mountain peak. Likewise it's easy to think about the connections that we as humans have with the natural world. The paper on which this article is printed originally came from a tree. Your food scraps could become soil for your garden after a few months in the compost bin. When we burn fossil fuels, we get power but we also release emissions to the environment. The connections are endless.

But perhaps most important in this process are our connections with one another as we consider environmental literacy together.

The Environmental Literacy Project Steering Committee has met twice now to plan the course of the project. Sitting around the table at those meetings are individuals from all corners of Vermont and from a broad range of occupations — not just people who work for environmental education organizations, but also people from state agencies, a farm, a school district, a ski resort, an energy company, a planning commission, a private business, a college and a newspaper. The group includes a college student and a research scientist.

The work of the committee began with a simple question, "What does environmental literacy look like in our communities and organizations?" The answers were wide-ranging: everyone on a block sharing one lawn mower, PTO members using real plates and silverware instead of disposable dishes at their meetings, committees at colleges figuring out ways to become carbon neutral, employees telecommuting a couple of days each week, community gardens supplying healthy, local food for all. The more the steering committee shared ideas, the more it became clear that these are things we can all do — whether we work for environmental organizations, government agencies, hospitals, schools or businesses. It really is all connected.

One of the goals of the environmental literacy dialogues is to identify model programs that already exist in our state. On Nov. 4, Vermont's State-Wide Environmental Education Programs alliance hosted a mock run of the statewide dialogue on environmental literacy in order to get feedback on the process. That meeting was held at Saint Michael's College in Colchester, and during it some of the college's faculty and staff described current initiatives there.

The education and biology departments at Saint Michael's have collaborated to create a garden called "Books in Bloom," full of flowers that occur in children's literature.

The entire project began as a collaboration between faculty members Valerie Bang-Jensen and Mark Lubkowitz of the education and biology departments, respectively. Education and biology — or more specifically, children's literature and botany — may not seem like the most likely pairing, but this garden illustrates just how well two disparate subjects can fit together.

More than 40 people participated in that first Environmental Literacy for Vermont dialogue. They all offered examples of an environmentally literate Vermont. One engineer described a project to install pellet stoves for low-income residents. A physician envisioned towns offering safe pedestrian routes to schools to combat childhood obesity and diabetes. A manager of a golf resort talked about his design for an environmentally sensitive course.

That gathering and the two Environmental Literacy for Vermont Steering Committee meetings held this fall mark just the beginning of the planning process. As winter arrives and the Environmental Literacy for Vermont conversations begin in earnest, we shouldn't be surprised to find that just as in nature, connected communities are environmentally

sensitive communities.

Jen Brown is the project coordinator for Environmental Literacy for Vermont and a graduate student at Antioch New England University. She lives in Brownsville, and Center Ossipee, N.H., and can be contacted at jen@fourwindsinstitute.org.