

# Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature

## Progress Summary – July 2011

---

### Connecting Communities and Families to Nature/ Reaching Out to Underserved Communities

---

**GOAL:** Develop and implement a plan to provide youth with structured and unstructured opportunities for play.

Objectives and current initiatives:

(a) **Schoolyard Habitats:** Strategies that provide increased support for Schoolyard Habitat Programs, which support the conversion of schoolyards to natural habitats for play and outdoor classrooms.

**Establish a comprehensive initiative to green all schools, both indoors and out of doors, and school grounds to create opportunities for outdoor learning experiences for students and members of the community.**

*Lead:* Karen Mullin, representing U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, [habitatkelly@yahoo.com](mailto:habitatkelly@yahoo.com). Schoolyard Habitat projects directly support the Partnership's environmental literacy (in-school) goal, particularly by providing hands-on outdoor experiences without need for transportation; and will add to the much called-for network of outdoor experiences available to children throughout communities. Federal agency efforts toward developing a regional environmental literacy strategy include a focus on school sites as a major resource to help meet educational needs and contribute to students' ability to engage in positive actions toward the environment. For effective implementation, Federal and state strategies should be aligned and work in concert with one another. An action team to address schoolyard habitats will be formed fall 2011.

**Maryland Green Schools:** *Lead:* Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (MAEOE), Joanne Schmader [greenschools@maeoe.org](mailto:greenschools@maeoe.org). The MD Green Schools Program has evolved over many years into a highly successful means to encourage, guide and reward schools for implementing a number of environmentally beneficial – as well as educational – practices inside and outside of their facilities and in their communities. It has grown to designating 20% of schools in the state as of 2011, and now also recognizes Green Centers such as environmental education centers and parks facilities. The program supports many of the Partnership's community and environmental literacy objectives. With the new Federal Green Ribbon Schools program, MAEOE is well-situated to guide development of a process for selection of the state nominees for Green Ribbon Schools, which will involve the State Dept of Education. This will likely present additional opportunities for Partnership participation or support for the program.

(b) **Trails:** Creation of trails to connect communities, parks and schools via trail systems that encourage walking, biking and increased time outdoors by youth and families.

**Establish a MD Trail Development Office to address trail planning and funding, trail advocacy, a one-stop trail GIS database, and the development of a new MD Trail Town Program.** *Lead:* Steve Carr, MD-DNR Land Acquisition & Planning, [scarr@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:scarr@dnr.state.md.us)

The Trails Development Office at DNR has just added a second staff member. The main focus of their work currently is on developing a Statewide Trail System that consists of a network of land and water trails, parks (National, state, county/ local), and public lands and includes connecting communities via trails. To increase collaboration on trail planning and funding, DNR staff will put together an inter-departmental committee to coordinate among state agencies on all trails issues; and will convene four regional roundtables, engaging counties in identifying areas of need and prioritizing critical connections. They are working to align both print and online/ interactive maps among the various agencies, making them more comprehensive, consistent, accessible and useful to the public. The website is continually updated [http://dnr.maryland.gov/land/md\\_trails/trails\\_in\\_md.asp](http://dnr.maryland.gov/land/md_trails/trails_in_md.asp). *Needs:* local support of communities; assistance from counties/ municipalities on identifying ways and potential sites to increase trails and access; working with schools to understand how best to utilize trails and lands that are available.

(c) **Nature Play Spaces:** Greening initiatives that create nature play areas within communities to provide outdoor experience for children closer to home.

**Incorporate nature play spaces into community health planning, land use planning and community development design.** *Lead:* Sandi Olek, MD-DNR Office for a Sustainable Future, [solek@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:solek@dnr.state.md.us)

The group has defined what a nature play space is, its benefits and suggested elements, and is introducing and promoting the concept to the public, parks managers, and others. Three demonstration projects are underway: Greenbriar State Park

(completed spring 2011); Annapolis Play & Learn day care center at DNR headquarters (construction completed summer 2011, planting/ dedication fall 2011); and Assateague State Park (in progress). Pilot caregiver training workshops have been conducted and the program may be expanded. They are currently defining and addressing challenges such as safety, liability, and maintenance (developing guidance on “ongoing care” and engaging the community); have begun compiling a pattern book with sample designs and guidance to help others in planning nature play spaces; are working on a publicity plan, and planning a calendar of presentations to professional groups. Future needs include developing connections to health specialists, urban community gardens, land use planning/ community design, and schoolyards.

- (d) **CJC: A statewide Civic Justice Corps (now Conservation Jobs Corps, CJC) to provide at-risk youth with opportunities to serve in conservation crews in State Parks and other public lands in partnership with the MD Dept of Juvenile Services and community non-profit organizations.**

**Expand and improve the existing CJC model to serve 1,000 at-risk youth statewide by 2015 with summer conservation jobs and outdoor enrichment activities.** *Lead: Fred Banks, MD-DNR CJC Program Director, [fbanks@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:fbanks@dnr.state.md.us); Captain Peyton Taylor, Exec. Director Conservation Corps & Interpretation for MD Park Service, [ptaylor@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:ptaylor@dnr.state.md.us)*

In its fourth summer of operation, CJC operates in a variety of locations throughout MD for its 6-week program, serving approximately 500 youth. The Baltimore program is at capacity (250 members), with crews established at Patapsco and Gunpowder State Parks and at Gwynns Falls. DNR and Parks and People Foundation are working on a pilot project proposal to expand the program to extend throughout the school year and include after-school programs and opportunities for CJC members. In addition to youth contributing to and learning about parks and natural areas, through trails maintenance, habitat conservation, and other work, they have more recreational enrichment experiences weekly such as camping and other pursuits for members to learn new outdoor life skills. The program provides job readiness training and is working to expand connections for graduates with colleges, MD Conservation Corps and employment opportunities. Needs: An ongoing need is continuing to build and maintain a diversity of relationships and partnerships to support CJC and its growth; and assistance with developing a means to track and measure success in terms of improved academic performance, employment, and more.

- (e) **An outdoor classroom program that provides voluntary curriculum-aligned programming and service learning opportunities on public lands in cooperation with local county school systems, local parks, and non-profit organizations.** *This objective has been incorporated into the environmental literacy planning (see goal below).*

- (f) **Interpretation: Increased access to naturalists on State Parks and public lands to provide interpretive activities for children and families to enhance their discovery and enjoyment of Maryland’s natural resources.**

**Develop a strategic state park and public lands Interpretive and Outdoor Classroom Plan, identifying funding needs to support a greater presence of park rangers and seasonal naturalist staff.** *Lead: Matt Ritter, MD-DNR Chief Interpretation, [mritter@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:mritter@dnr.state.md.us)*

Maryland State Parks currently offer a wide variety of programs that support Children In Nature goals, particularly for families and groups; and they are planning ways to increase specific environmental education programming, particularly those that will directly support school environmental literacy programs and align with new curriculum requirements. State parks will develop individual State Park Interpretive Plans to be incorporated into a 5-yr Comprehensive Interpretive Plan for all Parks, which will highlight park history, interpretive and recreational programs, nature center/visitor center visitation, and EE programming. Permanent and seasonal and park rangers and MD Conservation Corps receive training and program support, and enlist partnerships, to provide EE and interpretive programs and offer outdoor classroom experiences.

- (g) **Access to Nature: Increased opportunities for underserved communities to access Maryland State Parks and public lands through partnerships with organizations that serve minority students.**

**Develop and implement a comprehensive program to increase access and utilization of public lands and waterways for underserved communities.** *Leads: Sandi Olek, MD-DNR Office for a Sustainable Future, [solek@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:solek@dnr.state.md.us); Carrie Lhotsky, MD-DNR Office of Land Acquisition & Planning, [clhotsky@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:clhotsky@dnr.state.md.us).*

DNR is working with Morgan State University to develop a GIS Park Equity Analysis to identify underserved communities with least amount of access to parks & green space. The statewide analysis is based on demographics (incl. poverty level, density, age) on a census block scale and relative distance to green space. Results will be used to support state goals and made available to local sponsors and the public – a draft is expected fall 2011 and will be provided to the Partnership for review. The analysis can be used to help guide local comprehensive planning efforts to support increased access to natural spaces for children and their families, and to identify gaps and potential parcels for acquisition to improve access and connect trails and green spaces to communities.

Maryland State Parks are reporting an increase in numbers and greater diversity of visitors, so staff are responding to new trends and needs, such as providing staff with multi-cultural awareness training, hiring interpreters, developing bi-lingual signage, and fostering stewardship among new Marylanders who come from different cultural settings. Suggested new initiatives: (1) Initiate an exchange of practices and ideas between MD Park Service and staff from other parks (National, local, municipal) to seek common solutions and identify effective collaboration to achieve improved visitation and experiences; (2) Use these collective experiences to develop guidance for others to help increase attention to diverse populations and interests.

---

## **Strengthening Students' Connection to Nature During the School Day**

---

**GOAL:** Develop and implement a State Environmental Literacy Plan, which includes the following:

- (a) A review of current environmental education efforts in Maryland schools, including the environmental education bylaw, the Chesapeake 2000 commitments, and student environmental literacy levels.
- (b) Identification of curriculum necessary to develop environmentally literate students.
- (c) Identification of model outdoor field experiences that can be integrated into the regular school curriculum.
- (d) Professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, and non-formal environmental educators.
- (e) Methods to annually measure and report at the State and local level, progress of public school students toward becoming environmentally literate graduates.
- (f) A process for revising or updating the environmental literacy plan every five years or as needed.

*Leads:* Gary Hedges, MD State Dept of Education, [ghedges@msde.state.md.us](mailto:ghedges@msde.state.md.us); Jamie Baxter, Chesapeake Bay Trust, [jbaxter@cbtrust.org](mailto:jbaxter@cbtrust.org); Don Baugh, Chesapeake Bay Foundation/ No Child Left Inside Coalition, [dbaugh@cbf.org](mailto:dbaugh@cbf.org); Laurie Jenkins, Montgomery County Public Schools/ Lathrop E. Smith Environmental Education Center, [Laurie.C.Jenkins@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Laurie.C.Jenkins@mcpsmd.org).

### Summary of current initiatives:

As a result of concerted efforts by the Partnership and the Maryland No Child Left Inside Coalition, in September 2010, the Maryland State Board of Education passed the first environmental literacy high school graduation requirement in the nation, requiring local school systems to provide multidisciplinary environmental education programs for *all* Maryland public school students. In June 2011, the State Board of Education approved additional language to provide flexibility and oversight to school systems as they develop environmental literacy programs. The State Department of Education is currently revising the specific objectives under the state environmental literacy standards to identify and provide appropriate connections within the curriculum. Efforts are also underway in cooperation with the Partnership to identify solid opportunities for high quality professional development and outdoor environmental education experiences; to provide guidelines and sample multi-disciplinary curriculum connections to assist school systems in the development of effective environmental literacy programs that are well integrated throughout the subject areas; to provide a means for effective assurance and reporting; and to develop guidance and professional development to aid non-formal environmental education providers in aligning their program offerings with the school curriculum. The groups are working diligently toward an August 2011 completion date on these guidance materials and a process for implementation that will help each local school system (MD Local Education Agency or LEA) in developing its environmental literacy program.

In addition, the Partnership recommends that school programs provide a meaningful outdoor environmental education experience for every student every year, pre-K through grade 12. In 2011, a committee was formed to address this “Every Student Every Year (ESEY)” outdoor experience, as a part of the Environmental Literacy workgroup addressing school-based programs and curriculum. ESEY is creating criteria and actions that will assist and guide MD Local Education Agencies (LEA’s) in the implementation of the outdoor learning recommendations. Criteria describing characteristics of outdoor

environmental education have been incorporated into a document outlining “common qualities” of excellent environmental literacy programs, which will be provided to the Partnership for review and comment summer 2011; with completion slated to coincide with the start of the 2011-2012 school year.

With these historical efforts, Maryland is leading the nation in ensuring all students will be provided with the tools, skills and opportunities to understand and effectively handle the increasingly complex environmental issues and challenges facing the next generation.

---

## Additional Initiatives

---

**Increasing Public Awareness:** *Leads:* Britt Slattery, MD DNR [bslattery@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:bslattery@dnr.state.md.us) and Julie Dieguez, MD No Child Left Inside Coalition [jdieguez@cbf.org](mailto:jdieguez@cbf.org).

**Outreach and Communications:** DNR and NCLI staff coordinate frequently to assure a steady flow of communications, between and among the Partnership members and NCLI membership, as well as among the various workgroups and action teams within the Partnership. Progress reports, meeting minutes, coordination among leads, press releases and website management are attended to regularly. A quick reference of “FAQ’s” on environmental literacy and the graduation requirement was developed collaboratively, distributed, and posted online <http://www.cbf.org/page.aspx?pid=2551>. Although some of the individual initiatives include outreach components, an additional, more comprehensive approach to public outreach is needed to pave the way for more sweeping change. The Children In Nature Plan calls for a statewide outreach campaign “to educate parents, teachers and other adult leaders and caregivers about the many benefits of the broad spectrum of outdoor play and learning opportunities.” A group will be convened in early fall 2011 to help brainstorm and plan at least one main joint effort of the Partnership over the next year, and to plan additional ongoing outreach efforts.

**Youth Summit:** The second annual Maryland Green Schools Youth Summit was held June 3, 2011 at Sandy Point State Park, for a Bay-front day of learning, celebration, and enjoyment of the outdoors. Approximately 4,000 students, teachers, parents, and environmental education professionals participated in the event, hosted by the Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (MAEOE) in partnership with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and Maryland State Department of Education, through the Partnership. Nearly 60 learning stations were provided by environmental educators, and Maryland Green Schools were celebrated at awards ceremonies. For the 2012 Summit, the Partnership will begin early to help MAEOE plan and host this enormous event (begin seeking participants fall 2011).

**Metrics, Assessment, and Evaluation:** *Contact:* Britt Slattery, MD DNR [bslattery@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:bslattery@dnr.state.md.us)

Measuring progress and success is key to evaluating our efforts, improving effectiveness, and building support for ongoing and future activities. The Plan calls for devising a method of measuring baseline data and increased time spent in nature by children. This effort is dependent upon outside funding, and requires intentional planning and coordination among the various initiatives. Review of existing data and/or measurement practices from various Partners will help determine needs and next steps. This initiative **needs a lead** who can focus specifically on this.

**Finance Strategy:** *Lead:* Jamie Baxter, Chesapeake Bay Trust, [jbaxter@cbtrust.org](mailto:jbaxter@cbtrust.org)

Chesapeake Bay Trust (CBT) is working with DNR, MSDE and the Partnership members to develop near term priority initiatives, funding needs and opportunities. CBT will continue to lead planning efforts to engage elected officials, federal and state agencies, business leaders, private foundations and others to identify opportunities to finance recommendations from the Partnership. A meeting to kick off this effort is being planned for fall 2011. CBT offers 10 grant programs that support the broader objectives of the Children in Nature plan, including in particular community based restoration, education and engagement activities. CBT will announce \$425,000 to be available for environmental education in summer 2011 in addition to k-12 mini-grants which are available to support student field experiences, schoolyard habitat, outdoor classrooms and related projects in Maryland and DC Schools.