



Environmental Education—Vital Element of Alabama 4-H

Impact Statement

The Problem/Issue:

In 1992, the Institute for Southern Studies ranked Alabama last in environmental health. Characteristics measured included public drinking water systems that violated the Safe Drinking Water Act; acid rain; contaminated groundwater; air pollution; sites with substantial hazardous waste; the nation's largest hazardous waste dump; and weak regulatory agencies. More recently, the Alabama Collaborative for Environmental Education found that the need for remedial actions to address known problems of water pollution, air pollution, waste disposal, toxic substances and food safety is still paramount. In addition to these findings, business leaders have increasingly voiced a shared concern for greater public understanding and support for environmental measures needed to sustain economic vitality in the state. Alabama's youth—some of whom will be future business, community and political leaders—need factual information and critical thinking skills necessary to identify environmental and economic development issues and determine well-reasoned actions to achieve a balance.

What's Been Done:

According to the Alabama Collaborative for Environmental Education, environmental education programs should be factual, balanced and focused on helping students and the general public understand the scientific concepts which impact environmental issues. These programs should increase environmental awareness, promote knowledge of environmental concepts, develop basic environmental skills and promote personal responsibility and stewardship.

4-H has provided a variety of hands-on, inquiry-based learning opportunities for students and the adults who teach them. Each year, approximately 100 high school youth have participated in the statewide 4-H Environmental Stewardship Conference consisting of field exercises, role playing and debates on such environmental issues facing Alabama as relicensing of dams, potable drinking water, watershed management and land management. In addition, approximately 2,500-3,000 4th through 6th graders have annually participated in the 4-H Center's Environmental Education Outdoor Classroom. This field study-oriented program, conducted by trained environmental educators, provides a supplement to the classroom experience and focuses on developing an awareness and appreciation for the complex interrelationships of humans with the natural world. Since local

programs are offered to youth through clubs, individual projects, school enrichment and after-school learning, 20,000 additional children have learned about such topics as recycling, testing for radon, groundwater aquifers, safe drinking water, composting, energy use and the effects of littering.

Why We Care:

4-H provides youth with hands-on experiences that teach leadership and teamwork skills in a variety of activities. Environmental stewardship has traditionally offered activities in which cooperation, communication and problem solving are necessary to complete activities while youth from diverse backgrounds work together. 4-H'ers have been urged to critically examine information and make decisions that benefit themselves as well as others. While making these decisions, they must explore their options, set goals and work together--skills that will serve them in the future as responsible citizens and employees.