



UNIT I:

INTRODUCTION TO YOUTH IN THE OUTDOORS

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SUMMARY — Since the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA) was founded in 1922, environmental education has evolved and been made available to numerous young Americans. However, many youth in this country still lack access to conservation education and time spent in the outdoors. It remains imperative that we provide young people with the opportunity to better understand our environment through direct, positive experiences with nature. This unit focuses on the history of our nation’s conservation and environmental education movements, related educational theories, and the need today to engage youth in the outdoors.

Environmental Education and the Izaak Walton League

The Izaak Walton League has always considered one of its most important tasks to be educating young people about the importance of wise environmental stewardship. Environmental education has never been more needed than it is today, and the Izaak Walton League remains committed to the job.

The League’s Role

Dating back to its founding, the League’s mission statement includes a commitment to “promote means and opportunities for the education of the public with respect to our [natural] resources.”

In the organization’s early days, magazine editorials written by national president Will Dilg and political cartoons and commentary by prominent conservationist J. N. “Ding” Darling promoted the need to educate youth and protect outdoor America for future generations. In 1924, the League added to its national conservation platform, “That outdoor recreation as a major part of the life, education, and spiritual development of the American youth be nurtured.” That same year, League leaders added a “Mostly About Boys” column to the organization’s monthly magazine to promote outdoor activities for and adventures by America’s youth.

League leaders worked tirelessly to champion environmental education as the foundation of the League’s success and to introduce conservation “into the common school curriculum.” As the nation’s environmental education

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movement developed, so did the League's efforts to educate young people and engage them in the outdoors. The League dedicated a large part of the 1944 National Convention program to "the educational problem in conservation." The League launched a partnership with other interested national organizations — from park executives to educators — to work on the issue at a national level and formed a National Committee on Policies in Conservation Education for that purpose. League leaders recognized that educating students about conservation started with educating teachers and that for students, "What is needed is conversation every semester — from the time the young student is first able to grasp the meaning of the word 'resources.'"

During the 1960s, the League's Task Force on Young People worked to connect the League with young Americans and further the conservation education effort outside the classroom. This was followed with a League-sponsored Youth Conference in the 1970s to promote young people's involvement in conservation and environmental issues.

Working with other national and state conservation groups, the League successfully persuaded Congress to pass the 1970 Environmental Education Act — adding conservation education to public classrooms nationwide. That work continues today at the state and local levels as League chapters and state divisions work to expand environmental education requirements and opportunities for students.

The League's popular grassroots youth program, Uncle Ikes, was launched in the 1980s and has been run successfully by many chapters, particularly in Midwestern states, to engage youth and families in outdoor activities at League chapters. Youth Conventions, held annually in conjunction with the League's National Convention since the 1990s, bring together young people from across the country for outdoor education and recreation. It's often the highlight of the year for the youth — and the program leaders. League Youth Convention attendees have grown up to become youth mentors and gone on to pursue college degrees in environmental fields.

In the early 2000s, the League modified student memberships to include discounted rates for youth ages 17 and under to encourage more youth and families to become active in the League. The League encourages every chapter to include youth and student memberships as part of the chapter dues structure.

Today, as a member of the national Outdoors Alliance for Kids, the League is working to significantly expand the number and quality of opportunities for youth and families to connect with the outdoors. The League supports the Healthy Kids Outdoors Act — legislation that promotes local, state,

and federal strategies to connect youth and families with the natural world, improve children's health, and support future related economic growth and conservation efforts.

The League recognizes how important youth activities are to our chapters across the country. The League is working with volunteer leaders to further identify and offer resources chapters need to strengthen chapter youth programs, such as Young Ikes "fun sheets" (worksheets) and activity books, chapter how-to manuals, and discounted materials and products from outdoor sporting corporations.

Many conservation groups have come and gone since the League was founded in 1922, but the Izaak Walton League continues to play an important role in providing youth and adults with opportunities for positive experiences in nature.

Time spent enjoying the outdoors, especially as a child, can lead to a lifetime commitment to conserving an environment that is seen as beautiful, essential, and fun. Izaak Walton League leaders are uniquely situated to play a crucial role in inspiring the future conservationists needed to safeguard our natural heritage for generations to come.

Environmental Education Across America

There are many historical aspects to our nation's conservation and environmental education movements, a few of which are noted here. Having a better understanding of how these movements evolved will help League members plan their efforts to educate future conservationists.

Conservation Movement

At the end of the 19th century, America's natural resources were in trouble. Forest, wetland, and wilderness areas were quickly disappearing. Uncontrolled industrial discharges, raw sewage, and soil erosion threatened many of the nation's waterways. Iconic wildlife and fish species, once abundant across the country, were in danger of extinction.

As industrialization of the country continued, some Americans recognized that the natural resources being squandered might never be regained. And the conservation movement was born.

Government intervention was the first critical step to stemming these losses. At the urging of sportsmen and conservationists, President Theodore Roosevelt established the first Federal Bird Reservation on Florida's Pelican Island in 1903 — the first step in creating a National Wildlife Refuge System that would



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eventually safeguard more than 150 million acres of land and waters across the country. Shortly after that, the U.S. Forest Service was formed in 1905 to manage the country's forest resources for the future and the National Park Service was set up in 1916 to manage the growing number of national parks across the country in an effective, coordinated way.

Nationwide, citizen conservationists and new grassroots organizations supported these efforts and took on the cause to protect America's natural resources. In 1922, the Izaak Walton League joined the fight for wise environmental stewardship and focused its early efforts on issues ranging from stream pollution and protecting sport fish populations to wilderness conservation and refuge lands for waterfowl.

The 1930s saw the Dust Bowl years, and the nation became increasingly concerned with soil and water conservation and the impact of man on the natural world. The first Farm Bill was enacted in 1933 to help rural and farm communities devastated by drought and the Depression and to help protect the country's ability to feed its people. The League followed its early victory with the Migratory Bird Conservation Act by helping to pass federal legislation for a "duck stamp," the proceeds from which would help fund purchase of land for migratory waterfowl refuges.

In 1937, the League-supported Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act for the legislation's principal sponsors) was passed by Congress and signed into law. The law redirected an excise tax on firearms and ammunition to support state efforts to improve management and restoration of wildlife.

Following on-the-ground successes funded by Pittman-Robertson, Congress passed the similarly funded Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act (also known as the Dingell-Johnson Act) in 1950 to aid state sport fish restoration projects. These two federal laws have funded massive wildlife and fisheries habitat restoration efforts by state fish and wildlife agencies that continue today and have realized benefits for fish and wildlife, sportsmen, and all Americans who enjoy the outdoors.

These early successes contributed to a shift in public perception of the federal government's role in protecting the nation's natural resources — and the impact the American people could have in directing such protections. The League's decades-long battle for federal pollution legislation contributed to the passage of the landmark Clean Water Act in 1972. The League launched similar efforts to support passage of the Clean Air Act, including critical amendments to the Clean Air Act in 1990.

As the country moved into the 21st century, key conservation issues included energy development, agriculture, and clean water — all of which are focus areas for the Izaak Walton League.

Environmental Education Movement

At the beginning of the 20th century, the emphasis in environmental education was on natural history — the study of individual plants and animals — and it was usually called “nature education.” Land grant colleges, notably Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, began to produce materials for rural schools to use in incorporating nature education into their curricula. Since the science of ecology was in its infancy, little attention was paid to ecological connections among plants and animals or to the functioning of ecosystems as a whole.

Youth organizations including the Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, and 4-H Clubs taught their members conservation principles and provided opportunities to camp in and connect with the natural world.

Up until the 1960s, conservation leaders had primarily been naturalists and sportsmen and women — people with a deep affection for the outdoors. But then Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* appeared in 1962 and the decade ended with the nation’s first Earth Day in 1970 and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Suddenly, people who had expressed little interest in the natural world now were drawn to the environmental cause because of their concern about water and air pollution, solid waste disposal, recycling, and human impact on the climate — first acid rain, then ozone depletion and later climate change. Although natural history education certainly remained alive and well — especially at summer camps, IWLA chapters, and other places where youth could spend time outside — environmental education offered by schools and environmental groups increasingly reflected these new concerns.

Today, the environmental education focus is more about sustainable development — teaching people how to make positive changes in how they live today for the benefit of future generations. This movement concerns itself not only with ecology and the natural systems that sustain us but also with human rights and social justice.

Environmental concerns have increased and diversified a great deal since the League was founded in 1922 and new and varied environmental constituencies have sprung up. However, one thing has not changed: It is still vital that we provide young people with the opportunities to have direct, positive experiences with nature. Kids can learn a lot in a classroom or watching an educational television program, but nothing indoors can duplicate the unique sights, sounds, and experiences that nature outdoors provides.

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Engage Youth in the Outdoors

Today's youth have less contact with the natural world than any previous generation. In the past, children just naturally spent a lot of time outdoors, creating their own games and projects that kept their minds and bodies active. Organization, ideas, energy, and initiative provided by adults were not required. Today, due to numerous factors, such free play outdoors has become a thing of the past.

Society's Distractions

With the advent of new technology and an increase in urban populations, young people these days are most likely to be found in their free time glued to a screen of some sort — a television, a computer, an iPhone — where the flick of a finger brings fast and furious entertainment. They are less likely to be roaming outdoors, inventing their own ways of entertaining themselves and interacting with nature. Increasingly, young people's days are filled with activities that are sedentary, solitary, and pre-packaged. Stamina, creativity, and initiative are not required.

Schools frequently provide outdoor play for their students, although even this is usually structured and in man-made environments. In decades past, many school districts had offered multi-day outings to primitive camps or other outdoor facilities. Today, however, with state budget cuts and increased emphasis on improving reading and mathematics skills, field trips to explore nature are also dwindling.

One of the consequences of this new world has been documented by the National Academy of Sciences, which found that visits to national parks declined 23 percent from 1987 to 2006, recreational fishing declined by 25 percent from 1981 to 2005, and even hikes on the Appalachian Trail declined 18 percent from 2000 to 2005. Similar declines in outdoor activities were noted in other developed countries, such as Japan. The Academy traces these trends, not surprisingly, to the explosive growth of time that people are spending with the Internet, video games, and the other electronic marvels that we see around us today.

Nature Deficit Disorder

This withdrawal from the natural world has become a cause for concern. As recounted in the book *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, first published in 2005, all this time planted on the sofa is leading to increased obesity, diminished social interaction, and stunted development of the creative spirit in our young people. It also is likely leading to increasing disconnection with the natural world, which may impact how future

generations care about it. Those who care about wildlife and wild places may find themselves more and more isolated, and the cause of conservation may suffer.

Ask any dedicated conservationist why he or she cares about conserving nature, and you are likely to hear that the seeds of their dedication germinated in their youth. They might have gone fishing or hiking with their parents, camped with a Scout troop, or simply explored the neighborhood woods, creeks, and fields with friends. They might also have explored natural areas on school field trips guided by inspiring teachers. League chapters can play a critical role in regaining such experiences for today's youth.

Age-by-Age Outdoor Education

Chapter-sponsored youth events can attract children of all ages. The activities your chapter chooses to implement may vary according to the ages of the participants — or the age group you want to actively recruit. The simplest way to develop your chapter's youth program may be to consider activities according to the grade level of potential participants.

Pre-School

Even the youngest children, ages 2 to 4, are active learners, using all their senses and quickly absorbing information about the world around them. It is important for children this age to develop an appreciation for the joyful aspects of nature and learn what it means to be an active, connected part of the natural world. Early childhood development experts agree that a simple, play-based approach works best with this age group, giving the youth unstructured time to explore.

Kindergarten and Elementary School

With children ages 5 to 11, the most important aspect of outdoor education is simply to provide positive, engaging experiences with nature. Facts (meaning an exploration of science and other in-depth topics) are not as important with this age group as they will be for older children. An emphasis on serious environmental issues can actually be too scary for this age group and give kids a feeling of helplessness.

Consider Rachel Carson's thoughts from her book, *A Sense of Wonder*:

"I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.

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The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused — a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration, or love — then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.”

Therefore, the goal is to build a love of the outdoors, which will then lead to an interest in conserving it.

Middle School

As children enter middle school, around the age of 12, they begin to develop the ability to absorb more complex information and to think abstractly. Their interest in important issues confronting the world and how they might help solve them increases. Compared as a group with younger kids, middle school students are less apt to play imaginary games outdoors and to be unrestrained naturalists. (This age group tends to be self-conscious.) Instead, middle schoolers are increasingly preoccupied with their physical and ethical development. They spend time thinking about what they believe, what they stand for, and what they care about. They become committed to thinking for themselves.

Middle schoolers, therefore, are ready to hear about environmental issues and to consider what they might do to address them. It is essential at this time to give the children hope that we can successfully address our environmental problems, as daunting as many of them are. Many will just want to give up and resist learning about the environmental issues if they feel the situation is hopeless. The goal is not only to help children acquire essential environmental knowledge but also to empower them so they realize they can successfully bring about positive change. It helps a great deal if the youth leader can be positive, optimistic, and have a sense of humor.

High School

High school students are the most capable of absorbing complex information and thinking abstractly. It can be a challenge, however, to get them to a chapter event because they usually have a lot of extracurricular activities. With this age group, it is often important to tie environmental education to their immediate interests. To do this, it can be helpful to form partnerships with other organizations. Two possibilities are local schools and Scouting organizations.

Increasingly, high schools are requiring students to fulfill community service requirements prior to graduation. This is a nice idea, but it can be challenging to find enough service opportunities for every student. The League can help by providing service options, especially for long-term projects at chapter facilities or areas supported by the chapter. With Scout troops, IWLA members can volunteer to serve as merit badge advisors for environment-related badges. By filling needs such as these, IWLA chapters can attract increased numbers of high school students who are ready to learn about environmental stewardship and to help bring it about in the community.

Enjoying the Outdoors

No matter what age group your chapter hopes to engage in outdoor recreation and education, it should be a positive experience for the youth — and for your chapter volunteers. Building a love of nature and an interest in working to conserve natural resources all starts with having fun outdoors. The activities in the next section of this manual should help you do that.



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