

# BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATOR:

## A COMMITMENT TO COMPETENCE

By Joanne Lozar Glenn

**A**S SOMEONE WHO USED TO HIRE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATORS, BORA SIMMONS WOULD LOOK NOT ONLY AT EXPERIENCE BUT AT OTHER QUALIFICATIONS. SHE WOULD DETERMINE IF THEY'D EARNED DEGREES, IF THEY'D FACILITATED ACTIVITIES LIKE PROJECT LEARNING TREE OR PROJECT WILD, OR WHETHER THEY'D TAKEN A CERTAIN WORKSHOP OR HAD FIRST-AID CERTIFICATION.

This was often a tipping point in whether someone got hired.

"All other things being equal, these added pieces were a real benefit," Simmons says. "They showed that [the candidate] was a bit more connected to the field or had a bit more initiative."

This desire to be more, do more, reflects what Maslow believed was an innate human drive for self-actualization, a commitment to conscious competence. It is what propels many environmental educators to connect more deeply to the field, to pursue professional development on their own initiative.

But what does it mean to be competent as an environmental educator, and how does one achieve that goal? This—and the professional development paths environmental educators are taking—is what this article explores.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMPETENT?

"There's no short and sweet definition," Simmons says, "but it comes down to [being] able to provide instruction and develop materials for instruction that are good quality and meet the goals of environmental education."

Simmons has been director of, and a key player in, the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education (NPEEE)<sup>1</sup>, charged with setting, then documenting, the standards for high-quality environmental education. She believes NPEEE's landmark publication, *Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators*, does a good job of listing the competencies that would make someone an effective environmental educator, i.e., someone who

1. is environmentally literate;
2. knows the goals, theory, practice, and history of the field;
3. understands and accepts the professional responsibilities associated with delivering EE;
4. knows how to design and implement effective instruction;
5. knows how to foster learning, particularly a climate of inquiry; and
6. possesses the knowledge, abilities, and commitment to make assessment and evaluation integral to the EE learning process.

Environmental educators seeking to grow professionally, Simmons says, can start by thinking about their practice, knowledge, and skills, then mapping those against the competencies laid out in the *Guidelines*. This will reveal areas of strengths and weaknesses, and suggest a path that complements their learning needs.

### PATHS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE WHY AND THE WHAT

Some environmental educators want to deepen content knowledge or to learn teaching strategies that reach diverse audiences. Others seek a credential so that the field (and others outside it) will take them more seriously. Still others choose to be lifelong learners in a field they love.

*"Environmental educators seeking to grow professionally can start by thinking about their practice, knowledge, and skills, then mapping those against the competencies laid out in the Guidelines."*

*—Dr. Bora Simmons, Director, National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education*

For each different purpose, there is a path. The choices are many: conferences and workshops, networking, formal courses through universities, mentoring, self-directed reading and research, participation in ongoing programs, and even volunteering and internships.



*Margie Klein receives her NEEI certificate and pin from certification program director Dr. Allison Brody.*

<sup>1</sup> NPEEE was initiated in 1993 by the North American Association for Environmental Education and funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through the Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP) and the U.S. Forest Service, plus the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, University of Oregon, Northern Illinois University, and World Wildlife Fund.



Many environmental educators enjoy attending conferences and workshops where they can both learn and network with others in the field. “Recently I attended [events put on by] the state of Oregon,” says Jennifer Winston, a park ranger for a public land agency in Oregon. “Oregon has a networking and support system of other professionals [you can contact] when you have issues or need ideas, so you’re not always reinventing the wheel.”

Other EE professionals rely on formal courses at local universities, or online, to acquire the content, and sometimes the teaching strategies, needed to perform well in their jobs. “Unless you know the science behind a topic, it’s going to be hard to speak intelligently [about it],” says Mike Zawaski, who was certified through the Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education and who has pursued a masters degree in earth science to further his development as an instructor at Front Range Community College (Longmont, CO).

When learning is desired, but funds are low, some environmental educators turn to self-directed reading, research, and participation in ongoing programs, and supplement that with taking classes a la carte. Tod Price in Las Vegas, NV, took this “interdisciplinary” approach. He supplemented volunteer work, programs like Leave No Trace and Project Wild, and self-directed research with university courses and master gardeners classes as opportunities became available. “The interdisciplinary approach—seeing how one thing affects another—is my favorite thing,” Price says. “I now see the effects of things I wouldn’t have thought were related years ago.”

Still others choose certification programs through NAAEE state affiliates or through organizations like the National Association for Interpretation. These kinds of programs put professional development “in a neat package that makes it affordable and accessible to practitioners working in the field,” according to Gus Medina, EETAP project manager, and allow you to more easily document your competence to others. There are tangible and intangible benefits of this approach, EE professionals find. Winston, who earned a Nevada State Certificate in Environmental Education & Interpretation before she acquired her current position in Oregon, “liked that they brought in different people to teach different sections [of the program]. You got different perspectives... and you had [that certificate] at the end to show what you’ve been through. That’s pretty important. If you’re doing your own training, there’s no one to hold you to a higher level [of achievement].” And Zawaski, speaking to the intangibles, says, “I understand the EE process better by having gone through [the certification program].”

## COMMITTING TO COMPETENCE: THREE PROFILES

The variety of available professional development paths offers much to environmental educators seeking to be more competent in their work (see sidebar, “Professional Development: WIFFM?”). Here’s an up-close look at three environmental educators who committed to competence—and how they benefited because of that commitment.



Courtesy Stefanie Schmidt

### STEFANIE SCHMIDT

Schmidt has an undergraduate degree in marine biology and a certificate in environmental education and interpretation in the state of Nevada.<sup>2</sup> Her current professional development mantra is “learning on a budget.” Schmidt is constantly reading books and magazines, taking classes, and networking with other educators to learn new things and to improve how she communicates that information to her audiences at the aquarium facility where she works and the local museum where she volunteers.

## WIFFM (WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?)

*FOR EVERY PURPOSE THERE IS A PATH. HERE, INDIVIDUALS WEIGH IN ON THE QUESTION OF HOW PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BENEFITED THEM AS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATORS.*

*Margie Klein is a conservation educator at the Nevada Dept. of Wildlife (Las Vegas), is certified in the state of Nevada, and takes online courses from UWSP.*

*I want credentials, so that wherever I teach will take me seriously ... and so you can measure up to professional standards. People I talk to are pretty impressed that I’ve been through this [certification] program. It makes people look at the profession differently—they’re surprised it’s a whole field of study.*

*Doug McLaren is an extension forester at the University of Kentucky Department of Forestry, Lexington. He was certified in 2004 and sees professional development activities as a springboard to creating learning opportunities for others and as models for improving his own educational delivery.*

*The enthusiasm from attending classes made it more exciting for me to be involved in face-to-face environmental education. When a professional [demonstrates] an activity, I seem to take a lot more away from it. Going through the certification program, I saw the value of learning as much as you could from each component. By the end, I had that glue that puts it all together.*

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<sup>2</sup> The University of Nevada Las Vegas, Public Lands Institute, administers the certification program in environmental education & interpretation on behalf of the Southern Nevada Agency Partnership. The certification program was designed to meet NAAEE’s Core Competencies. For additional information about the program visit: [http://www.enviroedexchange.org/pdf/2010\\_Admissions\\_Packet.pdf](http://www.enviroedexchange.org/pdf/2010_Admissions_Packet.pdf).

The most valuable part of her learning so far has been the environmental education and interpretation program in which she earned a certificate after nine months of study.

“I learned so much from other educators about background information and ways to teach, and got to do an internship in a museum to further expand my experience,” she says.

“[It was] something that I could do around my full-time work schedule as well as something I could afford,” she added. “I [chose to] earn the certificate because I love nonformal teaching. [The program] was really helpful [because of] all the training and experience I acquired.

Though time and money are tight, Schmidt hopes to enroll in a masters program in EE. “I absolutely love being an environmental educator and am constantly looking for new opportunities to better educate myself and advance in my career.”

“Certification programs put professional development in a neat package that makes it affordable and accessible to practitioners working in the field and allow you to more easily document your competence to others.”

—Gus Medina, EETAP Project Manager, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point



**KERRY CASE**

Case earned EE certification from the state of Utah in 2005, when she was director of the Utah House at the Utah State University Extension program. “I was three years out of a grad school training program that included no environmental education background, relatively [new] in my career, and found myself in a position of leadership implementing EE programs,” Case says. “I relied pretty heavily on the Utah Society for Environmental Education (USEE) as a resource.”

Certification was an efficient way for her to get the background knowledge to perform her job well. “I feel that certification was a much richer learning experience for me [than taking workshops or attending conferences],” she says. “It forced me to look at my own work and demonstrate, based on that work, what I was doing.”

Since then, Case’s professional life has changed dramatically. She now directs the environmental center at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, and her professional development activity of choice is serving on the state certification committee and as a mentor to other certification candidates. “These have been great learning experiences for me,” she says.

“I feel that certification was a much richer learning experience for me [than taking workshops or attending conferences]. It forced me to look at my own work and demonstrate, based on that work, what I was doing.”

—Kerry Case, Director, Environmental Center, Westminster College

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: WIFFM (WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?)**

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Howard Drossman is a professor of environmental science at Colorado College (Colorado Springs, CO). He has a PhD in bioanalytical chemistry, was certified through the Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education, and is exploring the use of the certification process to train future educators.

I was happily pleased by the portfolio process [that was part of the certification program]. We have few chances to reflect on our career. What was helpful: [it let me sort out] whether I was a legitimate environmental educator or just a professor who happened to teach environmental science classes.

Karyn L. Johnson is a school gardens coordinator and Food for Thoughts program coordinator for the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. She is a lifelong learner who began her professional development path by getting involved with horticulture at the age of 16 and then went on to earn a number of degrees, including a B.S. in education.

I have three associate degrees (urban horticulture, landscape management, and landscape design). I try to attend any trainings that have to do with the environment [and] try to involve myself in service learning and community activities. I wanted to get certified in a couple of areas so I could better serve the schools. This way we’re not limited to only knowing gardening if [the school] wants us to do environmental education.

Tina Person is assistant director and lead teacher at Wildwood School, Aspen, CO. She prefers hands-on approaches to professional development.

The CAEE certification program got it all started for me. It built my confidence and with the research really ignited my interest. I am heading up the curriculum at [my school] and I want to make sure it is truly an environmental school. To do that I felt I needed to do more than just read books. [Certification] has been helpful because [now] I can help train [other] teachers in EE.





Courtesy Ilan Kelman



Courtesy Tina Person



Courtesy Tina Person



Courtesy Tina Person

*(Top left) Freeston invites a school group to join her on the trail. As a Pennsylvania native, Freeston attended conferences and workshops from the Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education to deepen her knowledge of Colorado's natural environment.*

*(Top right) SENSORY INVESTIGATION OF ALGAE IN RIVER WATER Kahlen and Olivia discovered some green slippery substance on the river's edge. Kahlen got a couple sticks to get a closer look, another child noticed the inquiry and plunged her hand in the water to feel the algae. On the walk back to Wildwood School, Kahlen noticed that the green algae was only in the still water close to the shore. This spurred conversations about seaweed and algae in the fish tank and different textures of water plants. Environmental educator Tina Person, who structured the lesson using EE guidelines for early childhood education, observed this discovery and watched it blossom. Continuing conversation after the experience linked the discovery to other places in the world.*

*(Middle left) FOSTERING A CLIMATE OF INQUIRY In a hands-on investigation designed to recognize the wonders of "invisible" aquatic life, teacher Megan Monaghan took a net and scraped the dead leaf sediment from the slow-moving river on the grounds of White River National Forest Service Land. Wildwood schoolchildren picked out the invertebrates living in the leaves and put them in the bowls of river water. The bowls were taken to the classroom and compared with pictures and descriptions for identification. At the end of the day, the invertebrates were returned to the river. The educator was an active learner in this process.*

*(Bottom left) DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN ACTIVE INVESTIGATION In this ice sculpture project Wildwood schoolchildren were introduced to varying temperatures and cause and effect concepts. The children used differently sized, reused containers and gathered natural materials to put in clear and colored water. They were frozen in the freezer then hung in the sun. In small groups kids discussed which would melt first and why, then we spent several days watching the slow melting and analyzing the outcome.*

Case's EE certification is up for renewal soon. Though having the credential is less relevant in her current job "and probably carries less weight in the higher education arena," she thinks she will get recertified. "It's a very important thing for our professional community—the field has now been professionalized in the state of Utah—and I want to support that," she says.



Courtesy Jennelle Freeston

### JENNELLE FREESTON

Freeston attributes much of her development as an environmental educator to an accumulation of on-the-job training and "fabulous mentoring." A quest for knowledge is one of her key drivers, and in 2005, when she realized "environmental interpretation was for me," she acquired certification

through the National Association for Interpretation (NAI). "The thing that has been most profound is being part of a national training. Getting NAI certification was huge," she says.

As a Pennsylvania transplant to Colorado, Freeston was hungry for knowledge of the natural environment in which she worked. She also wanted to be better able to reach the diverse audiences she serves in her career as an interpretive naturalist and water education specialist for the City of Boulder.

Along with getting NAI certification, she began attending conferences and workshops sponsored by the Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education (CAEE). Freeston relishes the networking that has come out of the professional development activities she's undertaken. "We keep each other abreast of information," she says, information that includes job referrals, effective EE programming, and volunteer retention.

"I was so fortunate to land in this profession," she says, "...to [be able to use my training to] spark interest in other people to do what I've always wanted to do: help protect this beautiful amazing place we call Earth."

### FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

No matter how you've entered the field—via formal teacher preparation, nonformal experiential learning, a university program, or your unique résumé of education and experience—finding the professional development activities that are right for you begins with an honest self-assessment, and then perhaps tailoring a professional development plan to meet your learning goals.

"If you are interested in creating your own professional development plan, it behooves you to think seriously about your own competencies – your knowledge and skills," Simmons advises. "I'd recommend starting the process by conducting a self-assessment using the content from state certification programs or the Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators." Where are your skills gaps? Focus on strengthening these areas.

"Once you have some goals in mind, then identify [available resources]," she adds. Does your state environmental association

offer workshops or conferences, or might it have a certification program? Do local universities offer courses, or are there online courses that offer content that would fill the gaps you've identified? If lack of funding is an issue, you might consider getting reading lists for those courses and embarking on self-study. *EELinked* (available through NAAEE) also offers a wide variety of learning opportunities.

Next, determine which resources make sense for you by assessing your learning style and motivation. Are you a self-starter who can "ferret out the resources you need," Simmons asks, or do you need the structure and feedback typical of more formal programs like course work and certification?

*"Our courses are designed to develop the same competencies as the certification programs and some states have suggested that people can take the UWSP courses to meet their certification requirements."*

*—Rick Wilke, EETAP Project Director and Distinguished Professor of Environmental Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point*

"Sit in your office and decide what you need to learn more about, then carve out time every week to learn about it," Simmons says. "Once you have a professional development plan, you can identify [relevant] learning opportunities, and once you commit, there's your structure." Creating deadlines with very specific targets can help. The other piece of it, Simmons says, is to assess your position in the field. "For example, [if you are choosing between certification and self-study], are you in a job where certification does not matter, but you see yourself moving to a place where certification makes you more marketable or gives you external credibility?" Simmons says. "To what extent do you want that external blessing from someone who says, 'Yes, you have met these rigorous requirements that you can take to your current or future employer?'"

Is a "formal" path like certification any better than less formal, more eclectic mixes of self-study learning opportunities? Simmons believes it's difficult to quantify. In fact, the question may be unanswerable, suggests Rick Wilke, EETAP project director and distinguished professor of environmental education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP).

*"Each approach to professional development has pros and cons. For example, if someone is pursuing professional development opportunities that an outside observer might judge as having no connections to each other, it might be more difficult to document your skills to a potential employer," Wilke says. "At least with a certification program, a potential or current employer can see you've gone through a program that has been nationally recognized."*

Environmental educators in states that do not offer certification programs and who want this kind of national recognition can consider taking courses such as the online environmental education courses offered by UWSP.

"Our courses are designed to develop the same competencies as the certification programs," Wilke says, "and some states have

suggested that people can take the UWSP courses to meet their certification requirements.” The most recent revision of the on-line “Fundamentals of EE” course, for example, included reworking assignments to relate each unit and activity to the NAAEE *Guidelines for the Initial Preparation of Environmental Educators*. UWSP developed a matrix that clearly illustrates those connections.

### THE TIME IS NOW

Given the strides the field has made since the 1990s, it’s not surprising that many environmental educators believe that EE’s star is rising and that now is the time to invest in professional development.

Regardless of which type of professional development you choose, creating an intelligent learning plan is key. “Constantly assess where you are and the areas [in which] you really need to continue your learning,” Simmons says. Then document what you’ve done, so that you can more easily promote yourself in job interviews, on résumés, or on applications.

Looking for professional development options to enhance your skills and brand you as a competent, lifelong learner invested in your field? The “Resources” sidebar can help.

### RESOURCES

#### DIRECTORY: Courses and Workshops

[EELinked](#)

#### ORGANIZATIONS

[North American Association for Environmental Education \(NAAEE\)](#)

[NAAEE state affiliates \(clickable map\)](#)

[National Association for Interpretation \(NAI\)](#)

#### ONLINE COURSES

University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point

[Online Courses](#)

Fundamentals of EE

Applied EE Program Evaluation

Strategic Planning and Implementation

Making EE Relevant for Culturally Diverse Audiences

Needs Assessment in Environmental Education and Interpretation

[Masters Degree in Environmental Education and Interpretation](#)

#### FOR INFORMATION ABOUT CERTIFICATION AND EE CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS VISIT:

[http://www.naaee.org/programs-and-initiatives/  
professional-certification-and-accreditation](http://www.naaee.org/programs-and-initiatives/professional-certification-and-accreditation)

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