

Urban Ecology Center: A Living Environmental Model

Urban Ecology Center Lives Sustainability

In the 1980s, a stroll through Milwaukee's Riverside Park would have presented a less-than-perfect picture: polluted water, land either abandoned or used for industrial waste disposal, and an active drug trade.

Then came the Urban Ecology Center, a grassroots organization formed to prevent crime in the park. Two decades later, the center's presence, partnership with local organizations, and outreach has led to a social and environmental revitalization in two Milwaukee parks.

More than 65,000 people, often youngsters, annually visit the two UEC locations to participate in outdoor science education classes, learn about ecological practices, or simply hike the nearby trails.

"We believe everyone should have access to public assets and feel safe while enjoying green spaces. Our way to achieve that is by providing a community center, available to everyone free of charge, with a focus on environmental education," explains Beth Fetterley, Urban Ecology Center (UEC) senior director of education and strategic planning.

Five Guiding Principles

Given its mission—to foster ecological understanding as inspiration for positive change, neighborhood by neighborhood—UEC takes a holistic approach to social responsibility.

"When you're talking about social responsibility as a whole, practicing what you preach is really important," Fetterley emphasizes. "We

practice it in many ways, often but not limited to a focus on the environment."

The center has developed five "guiding lenses" through which it views all initiatives, activities, and programming:

1. **Mission:** Provide outdoor education; protect, preserve, and enhance natural areas; and promote community.
2. **Educational Programming:** Maximize human contact with natural land; provide intergenerational mentoring; share information and resources; and model environmentally responsible behavior.
3. **Sustainability of Urban Ecosystems:** Support sustainability in 10 areas, including water and energy conservation, air quality, product re-use or waste reduction, and environmental justice.
4. **Feasibility/Practicality:** Determine financial affordability, staff or volunteer availability, and time and resources needed.
5. **Community:** Unite the environment and community by encouraging public participation and bringing together people of diverse backgrounds.

Staff frequently referred to the principles when wrestling with decisions related to the 2003 construction of its east side headquarters.

"We wanted to be as green as we possibly could be, yet we had to weigh that consideration against the construction timeline and budget," she says. The building, for example, features wood floors reclaimed from an elementary school and bricks recycled from Chicago locations. But a tower to generate wind power didn't make



Company name: Urban Ecology Center
Location: Milwaukee, Wisconsin
www.urbanecologycenter.org
Founded: 1991
Scope: Local
Employees: 35

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the cut because of its prolonged return on investment.

Staff Incentives and Initiatives

“We want to not only show people what the world can be but also what it should be,” says Fetterley. Through its Eco-Bucks program, UEC employees can earn up to \$1 per day by commuting in a way that does not use additional fossil fuels. Carpooling counts, as does buying a highly fuel-efficient vehicle such as a motorcycle or hybrid car. Many employees ride bikes or roller skate to commute, while the UEC’s executive director favors a unicycle.

Another 2008 staff initiative provided training on social capital to foster connections and better reflect the community.

“Because we have a tremendously diverse clientele, we want to always reach across cultural, economic, and social boundaries,” Fetterley explains. “We want everything we do—whether it’s recruiting board members or hiring employees or attracting people to our programs—to look like the city of Milwaukee.”

Indicators of Success

UEC’s drive for an environmental ethic has a sound basis in research, Fetterley notes. Several studies have shown that, among other factors, academic achievement goes

up and crime goes down when an urban area has accessible and usable green spaces. Other surveys show that people who become environmental leaders may have had a mentor who demonstrated respect for the land.

Fetterley meets with local schools to determine how well the UEC is providing environmental education and fulfilling the role of mentor. The organization also has a formal process for surveying stakeholders and program participants about the effectiveness of the UEC’s educational offerings. The evaluation process is based upon a logic model—identifying the results desired and “working backward” to develop the programs that will lead to those results.

“We want to create a citizenry that is informed and makes good policy decisions related to the ecosystem of the urban environment. But we can’t measure whether a kindergartner we work with today will make good policy decisions as an adult,” says Fetterley.

The questions UEC asks today will help it reach those intermediate outcomes which, in the future, will enable it to reach its long-term goal.

