

## GROWING YOUR NATURAL WORLD

Spending time in nature greatly contributes to the mental, physical, social and emotional growth of children, current research shows.<sup>1</sup> Our children need ways to get close to animals and nature – but how will they do this?

Schoolyards can offer a great chance for our urban youth to explore their local natural world. With this in mind, **Environmental Concern, Inc.** has joined forces with the **American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA)** to help schools create **Wildlife Friendly Schoolyards** through **The MARSH Project**. Environmental Concern is dedicated to promoting public understanding and stewardship of wetlands through experiential learning. AZA is comprised of 210 accredited zoos and aquariums throughout North America, that annually reach more than 145 million visitors. AZA and Environmental Concern are answering the call of the wild, and working to inspire millions of people to make a difference for nature. Together, the two organizations are bringing you a new way to *grow* and inspire others.

Here's how it works. The MARSH Project is a comprehensive approach to schoolyard wetland habitats design, construction and utilization that involves the entire school – administration, faculty, facility managers and most importantly students. Environmental Concern coordinates and facilitates the effort.

### **Step 1: Teacher Training**

Using internationally acclaimed wetland curriculum guides *WOW! The Wonders of Wetlands* and *POW! The Planning of Wetlands*, a full-day, on-site professional development training will be offered to teachers. During the training, teachers will gain the knowledge, tools, and resources to fully utilize the wetland habitat as an integrated component of the entire curriculum. They will come away with an understanding of the importance of schoolyard habitat use in the context of national and international pedagogy trends and actively participate in preliminary design processes including site selection and goal setting.

### **Step 2: Habitat Design**

An Environmental Concern Habitat Specialist, in concert with facility maintenance personnel, lead educators and chosen student leaders, conducts a thorough assessment of the schoolyard. All collected data is taken back to Environmental Concern's headquarters and converted into a detailed design portfolio including cost estimates, technical drawings and topographical maps and material lists.

### **Step 3: On-going Technical Support and Guidance**

AZA and Environmental Concern Inc. are committed to success and will be available to answer any questions that may arise regarding your project. Additionally, all MARSH Project schools will have access to online discussion forums which will facilitate peer to peer collaboration. Environmental Concern also publishes a quarterly newsletter just for wetland educators. *NOW! News on Wetlands* is full of ideas and opportunities to help enhance wetland education programming.

### **Step 4: Build the Wetland**

With design plans in hand, it is time for the schools to put shovels in the students' hands and plants in the ground. By the end of the project the schoolyard has been transformed into a living classroom.

### **Step 5: AZA Wildlife Friendly Schoolyard**

Through the special partnership between EC and AZA, any school that completes The MARSH Project will be recognized as a Wildlife Friendly Schoolyard. A commemorative all-weather sign along with a certificate will be issued to the school. Students will sign a pledge to protect the wonders of water by keeping their schoolyard wildlife friendly. In addition, the schools will be featured on AZA and EC national websites as success stories.

Ready to *grow*? For more information, please contact Bronwyn Mitchell, Education Director at [Dir.educate@wetland.org](mailto:Dir.educate@wetland.org)

<sup>1</sup>. “Young Children’s Relationship with Nature: Its Importance to Children’s Development and the Earth’s Future” By Randy White. 2004 White Hutchinson Leisure and Learning Group – Kansas City, MO – [www.whitehutchinson.com/children/articles/childnature.shtml](http://www.whitehutchinson.com/children/articles/childnature.shtml)