United States Environmental Protection Agency

Teaching About Wetlands

Why Is a Wetland Important?

Many people can't answer this question with confidence. Although the public's appreciation of wetlands is increasing, wetland studies have often been omitted from school curricula in the past. Once young people learn about the value of wetlands, they have the tools to become active citizens working to protect this critical feature of the environment for future generations.

Activity

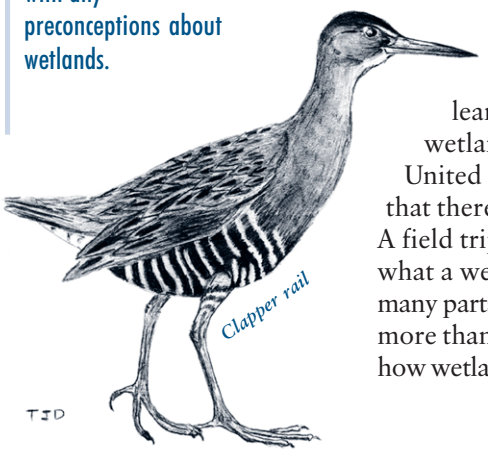
To help in planning what to teach, find out what the students already know.

Ask each student to write down
(1) a type of wetland,
(2) a type of animal associated with a wetland,
(3) a plant associated with a wetland, and
(4) two adjectives that describe a wetland.
After the students have answered the questions, poll the class on the answers for each item. The answers should help you identify the general level of knowledge, along with any preconceptions about wetlands.

What Should I Teach?

Many children and adults do not know what a wetland really is, so that's the place to start. Although wetlands are often wet, a wetland might not be wet year-round. In fact, many wetlands are only seasonally wet. Many wetlands serve as transition zones between land and water where the flow of water, the cycling of nutrients, and the energy of the sun produce a rich variety of plant and animal life. Wetlands are home to specially adapted water-loving plants and promote the development of characteristic wetland soils.

Students also need to know that wetlands protect water quality, provide fish and wildlife habitat, and store floodwater. Once we realize how helpful wetlands are, we can understand why we should conserve and protect them. Although laws protect some wetlands, threats from development, agriculture, and pollution are still very real. Simply helping students to understand and care about wetlands can go a long way toward preserving them.



How Should I Teach About Wetlands?

Wetland science lends itself to a variety of exciting learning methods. Because wetlands can be found all over the United States, there is a good chance that there are wetlands near your school. A field trip to a wetland shows students what a wetland looks like and how its many parts function together. Trips to more than one wetland can demonstrate how wetlands differ from each other.

Wetlands can also be incorporated into classroom work in the context of many subjects. As a natural feature of the environment, wetlands can be studied in physical science, biology, or even water chemistry units. Many wetlands are restored or protected by community cooperation and hard work, lending to studies in civics and sociology. The beauty and serenity of wetlands provide the perfect setting to practice art or to discuss and enjoy literature.

Classroom projects and field trips get young people excited about studying and protecting wetlands.

Where Can I Find Information?

Wetland education materials are becoming increasingly available as we see the benefit of teaching people of all ages about the wonders of wetlands. Many different materials are available on the internet at www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands.

In addition, many state natural resource and environmental agencies are developing classroom materials on wetlands. Local conservation commissions, libraries, and community environmental groups are often good sources. A wide variety of eye-catching posters, brochures, and even true-to-life scale models of wetlands are available to enhance study. Some wetland programs offer videos and TV downlinks. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's *Wild Things* program, for example, offers a live electronic field trip to a wildlife refuge.

Marsh fern

Tiger swallowtail

Dave Davis

Georgia has developed an Adopt-a-Wetland Program, based on its Adopt-a-Stream Program. A manual that explains how to find a wetland to adopt and how to conduct a wetland walk, perform surveys, and maintain the health of a wetland is available on the program's web site. Programs like Georgia's provide an opportunity for hands-on learning for all ages. For more information, call (404) 656-1639 or visit www.riversalive.org/aas.htm.

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Wetland Resources

On the Internet

EPA's Wetlands Division ..... www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands

Schoolyard Habitats Program ..... www.nwf.org/schoolyardhabitats

Ducks Unlimited ..... www.greenwing.org

Project WILD ..... www.projectwild.org

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ..... www.educators.fws.gov

U.S. Geological Survey ..... www.usgs.gov/education

Louisiana Coast ..... www.lacoast.gov/education/kids

National Geographic ..... www.nationalgeographic.com/geographyaction

A World in Our Backyard www.epa.gov/region01/students/teacher/wetlands.html

In Print

WOW! The Wonders of Wetlands: An Educator's Guide. Grades K–12. Order from The Watercourse, 201 Culbertson Hall, P.O. Box 170575, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717-0575; call (406) 994-5392 or visit www.montana.edu/wwwwater. $15.95 plus $4.50 shipping and handling.

Discover Wetlands. Grades 4–8. Order from the Washington State Department of Ecology, P.O. Box 47600, Olympia, WA 98504-7600; call (206) 438-7538 or visit www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/88016.html.

Project WET: Curriculum and Activity Guide. Order from Project WET, National and International Headquarters, 201 Culbertson Hall, P.O. Box 170570, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717-0570; call (406) 994-5392 or visit www.projectwet.org.