Introduction

The Earth Scouts is an Earth Charter U.S. educational programme that inspires youth to take action alone, and with others, to build societies that respect human rights, live in peace, practice participatory democracy, and use the planet’s resources with wisdom and concern for all life. The Earth Scouts is ‘scouting plus’ – a programme focused not only on learning and demonstrating skills and knowledge, but one that encourages using those skills and that knowledge towards “acting to improve the world!”

Jan Roberts, the President of Earth Charter U.S. in Tampa, Florida, launched the Earth Scouts programme in 2002 after the first Earth Charter Community Summit in 2001. She thought it might help get youth more involved with the Earth Charter, so together with a small team of volunteers, they created the initial structure of the Earth Scouts.
The main goal of the Earth Scouts is to provide young people with opportunities to learn and develop skills for seeing, analyzing and being inspired to help change the policies and practices that create unsustainable and life-devaluing communities – turning them instead into sustainable and life-valuing communities. These efforts also seek to stimulate a spirit of cooperation between youth, and between youth and adults, as they co-create communities that function in harmony with the values of the Earth Charter.

A notable anecdote from the first planning meeting for the Earth Scouts involved a group of adults sitting around a table, focused intently on writing a comprehensive mission statement. At one point, a ten year-old boy asked, “Are we doing this in adult talk or kid talk?” This poignant question helped define the focus of the Earth Scouts as a youth-centred programme, as well as shape the programme slogan: “Changing the World One Fun Badge at a Time – youth working together to make the Earth Charter a reality at home and in the community.”

In addition to deciding to put the focus on building a youth-centred programme, the following are other key policies and guidelines decided during the programme’s initial planning phase:

- Earth Scouts is inclusive – girls and boys are welcome and can be in the Earth Scouts together.
- Parents are facilitators and mentors, not autocratic leaders.
- Badge guidelines are open, offering room for local adaptation.
- Emphasis is on cooperation, not competition.
- Earth Scout groups are independent financially and administratively, but membership dues (fees) will not be charged. However groups can raise funds to support their activities.

Earth Scout groups are encouraged to follow these policies and guidelines, and to make their decisions and actions congruent with the mission, vision, and principles of the Earth Charter.

Katie Templin Culbert, a student at the University of South Florida, helped spearhead the early development of the Earth Scouts programme. She organized the implementation of the Earth Scouts Festival – a day of activities for children and youth highlighting Earth Charter principles – and several festivals were held during Earth Charter Community Summits throughout the US.

Katie, together with Sue Carter, a former curriculum developer, put together the first Earth Scouts Facilitator’s Guide, after realizing that parents and potential group leaders needed assistance starting and facilitating Earth Scouts Groups. It offers guidelines for earning badges and offers suggestions and examples for leading activities. Later, Kelli Lopardo, a former middle school science teacher and home-schooling parent, who had organized an Earth Scouts Festival in 2004, took on the challenge to further develop the Earth Scouts Facilitator’s Guide. To support this effort, Jan Roberts requested and received funding in 2005 from the Children’s Board of Hillsborough County in Tampa, Florida.

Earth Charter U.S. volunteer, Genie Skypek, is currently providing the support for the coordination and infrastructure of the Earth Scouts, in concert with Jan Roberts. The majority of the facilitator-leaders are parents, many of them engaged in home-schooling their children (parents following a flexible state-approved curriculum) or un-schooling (non-standards-based, child-led, interest-based learning). It’s of interest to note that the home-schooling movement is the fastest growing educational alternative in the United States.17 If the Earth Scouts were to become imbedded in the home-schooling system it would be a powerful mechanism for increasing young people’s awareness of the Earth Charter principles. Other facilitator-leaders include teachers who start Earth Scouts activities in their schools, and religious educators, with organizations such as the Universal Unitarian Church and Congregation of the Humility of Mary.

Efforts are underway to collect information about how many Earth Scouts groups are currently operating in the US, yet it’s known that at least 52 groups have been formed; they have received support from Earth Charter U.S. and its volunteers over the last few years. The Earth

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Scouts online listerv has 196 members, and has received inquiries about starting Earth Scouts groups from people in Canada, Mexico, Australia, Thailand and Rwanda.

Earth Charter U.S. plans to provide ongoing support to existing and new Earth Scout groups in the US, and hopes to spread the Earth Scouts programme throughout the global community. Genie Skypek is working to improve the Earth Scouts website and to provide additional information, materials and resources for Earth Scouts groups.

Methodological aspects

The Earth Scouts process for earning a badge

In general, Earth Scout groups have between five and fifteen members, comprised of youth from across a community or the members of one family (See Box 1 – experience about starting an Earth Scouts Family). With the assistance of a facilitator, groups engage in activities aimed at teaching youth about five basic principles from the Earth Charter: respect for the Earth, respect for human rights, participatory democracy, economic justice, and peace and nonviolence. There are five badges that can be earned, one for each principle, and are awarded in recognition that the Earth Scout has learned about, and acted upon, each principle. As Earth Scouts members who continue participating after earning all five badges – taking actions in support of the Earth Charter principles to improve their homes and their communities – can earn stripes of varying colours to indicate their achievements.

Participants must take the following steps to earn a badge:

1. Understand and become inspired about an Earth Charter principle.
2. Create something relating to that principle (for example, an art or music piece).
3. Act in the spirit of that principle to make a positive contribution in their local, national or global community (for example, writing a letter to the media, showing appreciation to others, working to make or change a law, building a park, etc.).

The role of group facilitator is to provide information and experiences that help educate and inspire youth about the Earth Charter principles. Once scouts are informed and inspired, it is expected that facilitators will ‘back away’ and provide only the necessary support to youth who will, in turn, design their own creative actions to further the application of those principles in their lives and communities. Youth can translate their understanding of Earth Charter principles into action – they can see how the principles are and aren’t supported by various policies and practices – and then decide how best to advocate for those principles and make a difference. By doing so, they are achieving the mission of the Earth Scouts: “Changing the World One Fun Badge at a Time – youth working together to make the Earth Charter a reality at home and in the community.”

Box 1 - Starting an Earth Scouts Family – Pam Woods, Portland, Oregon, USA:

I got an idea during one of the informational meetings about the Earth Scouts from another parent who was also interested in the programme. She voiced a difficulty that many other parents voice, which is “How do I find the time for yet another thing for our family to do?”

So I started thinking about simply having days at home where my three kids and I would just have fun “being Earth Scouts.” So when we took care of our lawn without using pesticides, we were being Earth Scouts because we were protecting the Earth in our yard, and once we even packed “zero-waste lunches” for school.

More recently, during conflict between the children, I simply halted everyone – even though part of the conflict was the need to hurry out to go to school – and we discussed our family, what it meant to us, and what was truly important to us. So we donned our “Earth Scout” hats and acknowledged that peace starts with us, and so we needed to communicate peacefully at home with those we love. The best way to be able to send that ripple out to all that we encounter and impact others is by living that way ourselves. This led to a truly wonderful discussion and a very smooth, loving, supportive morning!
Description of Earth Scouts guide and group activities

The Earth Scouts Facilitator’s Guide provides information on fostering an Earth Scouts culture based on cooperative learning. It gives suggestions for badge activities that empower scouts to engage with each other and their families in activities linked to the principles and values in the Earth Charter. The Guide suggests activities related to each of the sixteen principles of the Earth Charter Principles, to create awareness, skills, and knowledge. For example:

- To inspire – use exercises, games and songs (e.g. “Where We All Belong” by Raffi and “Heartbeat of the Earth” by Shana Banan – both songs were written in support of the Earth Charter); read, tell stories, and create skits and performances that involve and excite youth about the principles; walk in natural settings and hike in local, state or national parks.

- To increase knowledge – facilitate discussions about the principles and engage in research and study; attend the town council and meetings of relevant organizations and groups that are working on issues related to the principles.

- To be creative through art and science – express a personal vision and understanding of the principles by taking photos, making movies, drawing pictures or painting, weaving, writing, analyzing water quality at school, or testing local pollution levels, etc.

- To take action – design and carry out an individual and/or group activity at home, at school, or in the community that demonstrates the principle; walk or take a bus, ride a bike, communicate with local leaders, pick up litter in schools or parks, etc.

All these activities are key to helping Earth Scouts learn that they are capable, that they are an important and necessary part of their community, and that both individually and in groups they have the power to have a positive effect in the world.

The Earth Scouts Facilitator’s Guide also offers suggestions for activities for children of different ages. For very young children the guide offers suggestions for how to inform and inspire scouts through storytelling, role-playing, and sharing. For example, kids can be taught about the interconnection of all things by simply being taught about breathing – breathing out carbon dioxide helps plants live, and plants use our carbon dioxide to make the oxygen that we need to live. This information might deepen their connection to trees. Coming up with solutions and taking positive actions takes the learning further. Kids can talk about what happens when forests are being cut down and destroyed, and then explore ideas for taking actions to reduce these negatives, such as planting trees.

Facilitators of children ages three to five have also had success informing and inspiring scouts by reading and role-playing a Dr. Seuss story that emphasizes “sharing and caring,” “playing fair,” and “valuing everyone” – variations on the Earth Charter principles of peace and non-violence, economic justice, and human rights. The story explores the question, “Who does the hard work?” and the work “no-one else wants to do.” Following the role-playing, the kids discussed how they felt, what they thought was ‘fair,’ and what types of work they thought was hard or undesirable. The next time they gathered they discussed one hard job – garbage collecting – with discussions led by the facilitator. Over time, however, the kids took the lead and began thinking of ways to address the issue. They decided to make ‘thank you’ cards and baskets, which they did, and then gave them to their
garbage collectors. One garbage collector was so
touched that he said he was going to show his basket to
his ten year-old son, so his son could see that his work
was important.

For older kids, facilitators and other scouts can educate
the group about issues and the application of Earth
Charter Principles directly through reading, discussions,
and creative group work, such as brainstorming ideas.
Using these methods, group members can each choose
one or more of the principles to act on individually, or
find a common interest as a group and act together on
a project. One such group decided to organize a toy
sale, and used the money they earned to buy new toys
for children at a local hospital.

Other ways to involve older kids is to take them on field
trips and make visits to local sites and organizations
engaged in the issues the kids care about. Most kids
enjoy nature and are positive about visiting wetlands,
rivers, and lakes, looking for birds and wildlife, going to
parks and nature preserves, and walking in the forests.
In addition, kids natural interest in food can lead to visits
to local farms, farmer’s markets, and food processing
plants. These outings can be enriched by enlisting the
participation of local naturalists and experts, and
of leaders of local chapters of organizations like
the Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, and the
Sierra Club, and Community-Supported Agriculture
associations, among others. The guide provides a range
of sample activities for older kids, along with additional
resources and examples to help groups succeed.

**Issues and topics addressed
in the guide**

The activities in the Earth Scouts Facilitator’s Guide can
be linked to the following themes derived from the
Earth Charter:

**Human Rights**
- Providing basic needs (food, water, health care,
  shelter, clothing and education)
- Taking a stand against discrimination
- Protecting from harm

**Economic Justice:**
- Respecting workers and producers
- Demanding corporate social and environmental
  responsibility

**Participatory Democracy:**
- Consensus and group decision-making
- Respecting and valuing differing points of view
- Participating in all levels of local, state and federal
government

**Peace and Nonviolence:**
- Respecting cultural differences and commonalities
  in the global human family
- Resolving conflict creatively and without violence
- Valuing and practicing cooperation and developing
  inner peace

**Respect for Nature:**
- Understanding and respecting how nature’s systems
  and cycles work
- Valuing the natural world as a source of personal
  fulfillment
- Understanding the impact and consequences of
  humans on local and global environments

**Interaction between facilitators
and youth**

Children and youth should participate fully in defining
the group’s activities and in discussing and taking
actions on the topics and issues they learn about. While
facilitators may need to provide guidance and direction,
their main role is to nurture in young people the skills
and knowledge they need to build confidence and take
actions towards earning their badges and making
positive changes in their own lives, in the lives of others,
and in the wider world.

**Actions and results from the
learning process**

Earth Scouts learn to put their values in action as they
‘take a stand’ regarding the issues they study and
experience. Skills and techniques to engage in creative
problem-solving are covered in the guide, as is an
emphasis on helping youth move from understanding the problem to envisioning solutions and taking actions. For example, in the earlier discussion about what work is not valued in the community – garbage collection – the group decided to take an action ‘close to home’ and give thank you cards and baskets to their own garbage worker. Facilitators can also help youth translate their creative ‘close to home’ solutions to a wider community. In this case it might have been organizing an “Appreciate Your Garbage Worker Day” in their town or sending letters of appreciation for publication in their community media outlets.

The following are a few examples of actions Earth Scouts have taken, and are planning to take, to apply Earth Charter principles in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Jonathan, a thirteen year-old boy in Tampa, Florida started a “Kits for Kids” project for his Bar Mitzvah. He requested that his gifts be in the form of donations to Earth Charter US. He used the donations to purchase the kits, which included school-related necessities such as backpacks, clothing, supplies, as well as disposable cameras and other items, for the children at the Kinship Centre (a programme funded by the Children’s Board of Hillsborough County, that provides support to grandparents raising their grandchildren due to the death or inability of the children’s parents to provide care). Many grandparents are not the legal guardians of these children and have limited access to financial aid, so for some, these kits offer valuable and much-needed supplies. Jonathan reported raising more than US$3,000 for this project and the Children’s Board is considering expanding this project to other Kinship Centres.

An Earth Scouts group in Portland, Oregon joined an Earth Day celebration, participated in recycled art projects, and attended a Bird Festival, a conference designed to get kids away from television and back in touch with nature – all involving lots of fun, action-oriented activities, and energetic participation with their community.

Several families starting Earth Scouts in the state of Tennessee attended a Green Power Festival and scouts participated in games and activities at a special “kids energy play shop.” The scouts learned about solar toys and solar ovens, and recycling. After the festival, the group set up an Earth Scouts booth to inform others about the Earth Scouts.

In Phoenix, Arizona one Earth Scouts group is planning to build solar-powered cars, and then race them for fun. One of their weekend outings included attending the Farmers’ Market, and they have also sold products to raise money for a local anti-hunger nonprofit organization. In addition, this scout group went on a camping trip in which all members participated in hands-on service learning projects involving organic gardening, caring for animals and living close to the earth.

Lessons learned

The Earth Scouts programme offers unique characteristics that make it a valuable way for parents and youth to get informed and inspired to care for the Earth and all life. Its unique characteristics are its inclusiveness, making it possible for girls and boys to be in the same group, and its integrative and broad focus, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the environment with social, economic, cultural, and political concerns.

In order to help scouts make these interconnections, group facilitators, educators, and parents need resources that show the relationships between peace, participatory democracy, human rights, economic justice and environmental sustainability. All too often, as Genie Skypek observed, “Parents and facilitators may not know how to get "the big picture" because this kind of analysis is not available in our more common information media, so we need to make these analyses available to them.”

While the coordinators and volunteers of the Earth Scouts programme seek and receive feedback from some groups about the opportunities and actions scouts have taken, they would like to hear more stories. Further, they would like to know how participating in the programme has effected scouts, parents, families, and
communities. The coordinators need to understand how these activities have impacted participants in order to continue assessing, improving, and growing the programme.

The coordinators believe that the Earth Scouts Facilitator's Guide needs to more strongly emphasize the ‘action-taking’ process and to define it as a necessary requirement for earning a badge. Towards this, programme coordinators are considering developing an online training programme for facilitators and parents to more successfully lead scouts toward ‘action-taking’ endpoints and helping scouts fulfill their goal of “acting to improve the world.”

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