

Earth Charter School Seal Case Study

La Joya School in Costa Rica: Growing opportunities for sustainable success

by Carly Jo Riggins



UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter



University
for Peace



“NO PIENSES COMO YO,
PERO RESPETA QUE
YO PIENSE DIFERENTE”

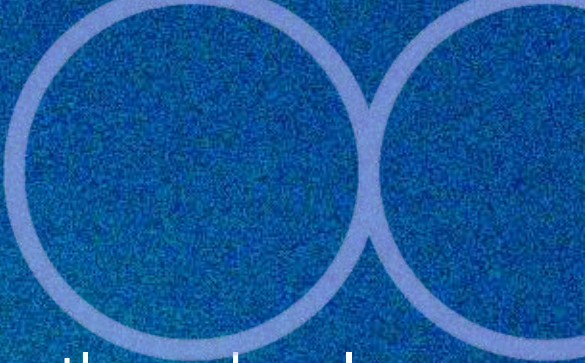
Re Castro
18

La Joya School

La Joya is a relatively small rural public school about an hour south of Costa Rica's capital city, San José. Founded in 1948, the school's mission is to promote learning spaces that encourage students to acquire skills in addition to knowledge that will aid them in their lives. These learning spaces are realized by using the environment as a classroom that promotes collaborative work and care for the Earth.

For many years, this school had a serious problem of school dropouts and students not able to continue secondary education, let alone higher education. When the current School Director, Banacheck García started to work in this school, he realized that important changes needed to be done, despite the funding limitations. With the support of the community, the school has expanded to utilize the environment around the school to improve the quality of education, offering additional educational settings and interdisciplinary curriculum. In 2018 the school opened an Ecological Park, which provides educational settings as well as community engagement opportunities. Programmes of the Ecological Park include: a school farm, school garden, ecological classroom, community garden, outdoor library, educational greenhouse, natural pharmacy, path of values, composting, botanical garden, and a math literacy garden.

Each of these programmes is connected to at least one of the pillars of the Earth Charter. La Joya's school director uses the ECSS to formulate these programmes to have a global perspective that encourages students to consider how their actions impact others - in their community, in Costa Rica, and around the world.



The composting project is monitored by students and provides high-quality organic fertilizer at a low cost to the school, which can be used to benefit other programmes. Over one-hundred fifty tires have been recycled for a project that serves many purposes: stabilizing a steep hill to prevent erosion, providing plant beds for vegetables that can be used in the cafeteria, allowing for beautification by painting the tires, and reusing a non-biodegradable object. The garden teaches students valuable skills in agriculture but it also provides fresh vegetables and herbs that are used for meals, allowing the school budget to be used instead for procuring more expensive proteins.

Programs implemented at school have also been successfully adapted in the homes of students including vegetable gardens and chicken coops. Using excess seeds from the school garden, students were able to take home seeds and use the skills they learned at school to grow vegetables at home. Produce harvested from the school garden, that is in excess of what the kitchen can use for student meals, is sent home with students to limit food waste and share the bounty of the Ecological Park.

The support of the community around the school has been essential to its development and is celebrated accordingly. Community members are engaged through plant sales, volunteer days, and access to community garden planters along the fence of the Ecological Park. Community members are also celebrated for their contributions through the Footprints that Inspire project, which dedicates spaces to those who helped build and support the school's programs and facilities.



School Profile

Name: *La Joya School*

Location: *Desamparados, San Jose Province, Costa Rica*

School type: *Public*

School level: *Primary*

Number of Students: *12*

Number of Teachers: *3*

Prior engagement in sustainable initiatives: *Creation of an Ecological Park in 2018 with outdoor classroom spaces, community gardens, and sustainable farming practices for student engagement and education; composting program; Ecological Classroom dedicated to the pillars of The Earth Charter; community plant sales using recycled and donated materials that use profits to reinvest in ESD; and a recycled tire farming project: “Proyecto Llantas que Alimentan.”*

Prior Engagement with the Earth Charter: *School director completed the ECI Online Certificate Program for Education in Sustainable Development through a scholarship from the Costa Rican Ministry of Education. Completed the ECSS assessment first in 2022, and started the process again in 2026.*

Connection to Earth Charter Pillars:

	Respect & Care for the Community of Life	Ecological Integrity	Social & Economic Justice	Democracy, Nonviolence & Peace
School Farm	×	×		×
Values Garden	×	×	×	×
Ecological Classroom		×		×
Plant Sales	×	×	×	
Community Garden	×	×	×	×
Trail of Values	×			×
Outdoor Library		×		×
Educational Greenhouse	×	×		×
Natural Pharmacy	×	×	×	×
Recycled Tire Farm	×	×		×
Botanical Garden		×		×

ECSS IMPLEMENTATION

Under the guidance of the knowledge their school director received from the ECI Online Certificate Program for Education in Sustainable Development, projects and programmes at La Joya were already being developed with the principles of The Earth Charter in mind. To best utilize their limited resources and funding, development of the Ecological Park has spread to every corner. This has inspired the creation of the Math Garden, which brings principles of mathematics outside to show practical applications of geometry and algebra in settings outside of a standard classroom.

Doing the assessment the first time was also a learning experience in how to apply for the seal. While school staff learned more about how their curriculum and programmes connected to The Earth Charter, they also learned how to streamline the assessment process. Completing the first assessment encouraged a new perspective on their pedagogy: requiring more nuanced analysis of the purpose of programmes and intentional creation of interdisciplinary education for sustainable development.



IMPACT OF ECSS



Deciding to do the ECSS assessment again was an opportunity for the school to become more intentional about how their programmes and curriculum align with the principles of The Earth Charter. With an understanding that school leaders have the responsibility to help guide their students to become better global citizens, working towards a second seal encourages programme development to be globally minded with benefits that can be seen locally.

Utilizing the Earth Charter framework has helped the students, faculty, and community of La Joya to approach all situations with improvement of the environment at the forefront of their decision making. By engraining The Charter into curricula and programme development, keeping a sustainability mindset has become second nature as a part of their daily routines. By using the Earth as a classroom, students are learning to care for animals, avoid waste, and consider ways to conserve their natural resources. These behaviors and mindsets are reiterated daily and modeled by faculty and staff. This has created an environment that breeds empathy, encouraging students to start with empathy for nature and their classmates, and let that spread into empathy for their neighbors - in their community and around the world.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

La Joya has cultivated a unique educational environment where reflection and critical thinking about sustainability are woven into daily life. The school's approach emphasizes experiential learning, utilizing the ecological farm, gardens, and outdoor classrooms as living classrooms. Here, students learn by observing, experimenting, and caring for animals and plants, which not only strengthens their scientific inquiry skills but also fosters empathy, responsibility, and respect for all forms of life. Programmes like the educational greenhouse and composting station encourage students to ask questions, investigate natural processes, and draw their own conclusions about the impact of their actions on the environment.

Beyond experiential learning, La Joya places a strong emphasis on the importance of instilling values in education and community engagement. Initiatives such as the Community Garden and the Circular Economy project invite students, staff, and families to collaborate in sustainable practices, from recycling and reusing materials to growing food for the community. These activities are designed to prompt reflection on broader social and environmental issues, connecting local actions to global challenges like resource conservation and responsible consumption. The school's curriculum is further enriched by the integration of the Earth Charter, ensuring that students consider both local and global perspectives in their learning.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Critical thinking and reflection are also nurtured through democratic participation and ethical decision making. Students are encouraged to apply the school's core values in meaningful and realistic contexts. Teachers and staff model reflective practices through ongoing professional development and collaborative projects, continually assessing and evolving their approaches to sustainability education.

Future plans for sustainability include expanding existing efforts to conserve water, and furthering their use of renewable energy sources. La Joya is currently working to develop strategic partnerships that could help them acquire and install additional solar panels. These panels would provide lighting at night, making the Ecological Park both accessible and safe for students and community members to use when school is not in session. The school is already collecting rainwater, but they are working to increase this effort with two more 1,000 liter tanks. The rainwater is primarily used during the dry season to water the garden, and collected during the rainy summer season. The school already has a very successful composting programme, which supports chemical-free cultivation in the Ecological Park, but they plan to further expand their commitment to composting as well as recycling.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION



La Joya actively shares its sustainability journey and achievements with the broader community through a variety of collaborative projects, public events, and communication channels. The school regularly involves families, local organizations, and volunteers in initiatives such as the Community Garden, Circular Economy project, and Ecological Park volunteer days. These projects not only invite community members to participate in the school's sustainability efforts but also provide a way to showcase the school's progress and impact. The school further immortalizes the contributions of dedicated community members by naming spaces, gardens, and projects in their honor, creating a sense of shared ownership and pride.



Additionally, La Joya leverages social media, particularly Facebook, to communicate updates, celebrate milestones, and invite support from the wider public. The school uses this platform to highlight student projects, announce events, and share stories of transformation, making their sustainability journey visible beyond the immediate school grounds. Partnerships with local institutions, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and nearby universities, also help amplify the school's achievements and foster a network of support for ongoing and future sustainability initiatives.



External stakeholders, including local organizations, government agencies, and universities, also play a significant role in sustaining and expanding the school's environmental initiatives. Partnerships with entities like the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, the 4S Clubs Program, and the University of Costa Rica provide technical expertise, resources, and educational opportunities that enrich the school's programs. Volunteers from the community participate in daily operations, special projects, and educational workshops, helping to create and maintain spaces like the Botanical Garden and the educational greenhouse. Through these partnerships and the active involvement of parents, La Joya has built a robust support network that not only sustains its projects but also amplifies their impact throughout the wider community.

AWARDS/CERTIFICATIONS:

- Costa Rica Ministry of Education's Blue Flag Program - Five Star School
- Certified Carbon Neutral Educational Center by the Green Trust Foundation
- REDUCA Award 2021-2022 by the Latin American Network for Education
- Cardenillo Award
- Recognized by the Municipality of Desamparados as an Outstanding School for Environmental Outreach
- Recognized by Aguarosqui and Earth Charter school networks



Would you like to elevate sustainability and transform your school into a place where **SUSTAINABILITY** and **ETHICAL VALUES** matter?

Visit our webpage earthcharter.org for more information or contact us directly at info@earthcharter.org

Want to learn more about this inspiring school? Check out this [video](#).