STEP 4 | Evaluate Your Campus

After your outdoor classroom planning committee is established and you have enrolled in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program, your next step is to **evaluate your campus**. The question is not whether the land on your campus has value for education and wildlife, but how your committee chooses to use the campus as an educational tool and wildlife habitat. Below are the steps you and your planning committee should take in order to accurately and efficiently evaluate your campus.

School Campus Map

Get a copy of the school campus map from the administrator or school system office that you can easily edit and on which you can include your site evaluation notes. The map should include the following:

- Buildings, sidewalks, parking lots, athletic fields, playgrounds, and retention ponds;
- Utility lines such as gas, electricity, water, sewer, phone, cable, drainage, or sprinklers;
- Paved roads, walkways and traffic patterns including cars, bikes, pedestrians, and delivery vehicles;
- Neighboring properties or roads; and
- Future building sites that need to be avoided.

Site Evaluation

Set up a meeting with your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant and your planning committee to evaluate your campus. This should be scheduled after organizing your planning committee and enrolling in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program. Also, invite your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) Agent to assist with the evaluation.

Provide copies of the Site Evaluation Checklist (*available in the OC Planning Guide & Checklists section of the Alabama Wildlife Federation's website*) for all planning committee members to use during the site evaluation. Note the following on your **Site Evaluation Checklist:**

- ❑ **Site Availability** – Do not consider sites where future construction projects such as new buildings, parking lots, playgrounds or portables are planned.
- ❑ **Travel Time** – Choose a site that is close to the school building and easily accessible so that teachers can limit travel time to 5-minutes or less and maximize activity time; otherwise, the teachers will not use the outdoor classroom for educational purposes due to their hectic schedules.
- ❑ **Accessibility to ALL Students** – Make sure that your outdoor classroom site is accessible to all students, including your students with disabilities or special needs (such as wheelchair access).
- ❑ **Already Existing Features** – Sometimes you can develop your outdoor classroom area(s) around features that already exist on your campus, which will help you save time and money, but these need to be in an area that is easily accessible with a quick travel time. Useful pre-existing features could include the following:
  - Classroom Seating such as a gazebo, pavilion, amphitheater, outdoor stage or benches
  - Raised Bed Gardens such as vegetable/herb gardens, butterfly gardens, or other themed gardens
  - Aquatic Study Areas such as a fish pond, frog pond, wetland, stream, or bog garden
  - Natural Areas such as a forest or meadow
  - Nature Trail such as a path through the woods.

Contact your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant to assist you with your school's site evaluation.

- ❑ **Site Size** – Take measurements of the potential site(s) with your students. Keep in mind that a half-acre courtyard area is easier to maintain than an acre or more of land/forest near the school…smaller can be better.
- ❑ **Directional Orientation** – Note the directional orientation (north, south, east and west) on your map to help determine which areas will receive the most sun and wind exposure.
- ❑ **Sun Exposure** – Note how much sun exposure your potential outdoor classroom site(s) receive at different times of day and during different times of the year to help determine which species of plants to include. Southern or western exposures tend to receive the most sunlight and afternoon heat, whereas northern or northeastern exposures receive the least. Also, think about how the angle of the sun changes due to the tilt of the Earth during different seasons of the year.
- ❑ **Erosion or Drainage Problems** – Avoid areas with erosion or drainage problems unless it is an area where the problem can be remediated by installing French drains, a rain garden, plants and/or by other means.

- ❑ **Water Sources** – Identify natural water sources like streams, wetlands or ponds that provide suitable areas for hands-on aquatic study activities with students. Also, look for spigots, downspouts, rain barrels, and sprinklers that can be used to water your plants.
- ❑ **Wildlife Habitat** – Assess the habitat (food, water, shelter & places to raise young) available for backyard wildlife. *See the Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips on page 21 and on the AWF's website.*
- ❑ **Electricity Sources** – Look for electrical outlets in case you need access to electricity for an activity or a learning station (such as the pump on a backyard pond).
- ❑ **Soil Quality & Soil Type** – Contact your county Extension office or garden supply center for information and tools on how to conduct a soil test to help you determine your soil type and the species of plants and trees that can grow in your outdoor classroom site.
- ❑ **Watershed** – Map the watershed around your school including where run-off from buildings and paved areas collect and which areas drain quickly or are very dry. Research the rivers and watersheds near you using the Auburn University Water Resources Center website at http://aaes.auburn.edu/wrc/resource/rivers-of-alabama/.
- ❑ **Topography** – Note the elevation and slope. For example, hills and rises may provide a good location for an amphitheater, but may not be easily accessible; whereas, low areas may collect water and remain "mucky," making them ideal for an artificial wetland or rain garden. When building a nature trail on a slope, consider creating a trail that winds left and right with switchbacks to minimize the slope for wheelchairs and to reduce potential erosion.
- ❑ **Geology** – Research the geological characteristics found in your county; and, if possible, collect and identify different types of rocks around your school grounds.
- ❑ **Wind Direction** – If needed, plant evergreens to help protect your outdoor classroom area from potentially high winds, keeping in mind that the weather systems typically travel from west to east across Alabama.
- ❑ **Foot Traffic** – Note any areas that contain foot paths utilized by students, teachers, and the community, and consider formalizing the path with a walkway to direct the traffic through the outdoor classroom site without disturbing it.
- ❑ **Safety Hazards** – Check for any nearby hazards or safety concerns such as poison ivy, wasp nests, or busy streets around your outdoor classroom.
- ❑ **Litter & Vandalism Issues** – Identify any potential sources for litter or vandalism around your outdoor classroom site. (*Review the Vandalism Reduction Tips on page 22 and on AWF's website.*)
- ❑ **Low Maintenance** – Choose and design your outdoor classroom with minimal maintenance needs in mind. Remember, planting native plants and trees will reduce your watering responsibilities.
- ❑ **Non-native, Invasive Plants** – If possible, identify and remove all non-native, invasive plants and replace them with natives. *(Contact your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System office for free assistance with the identification of non-native plants.)*
- ❑ **Neighbors** – Note the land use on adjacent properties. Neighbors who also manage their property for wildlife can be beneficial, whereas businesses and streets may create danger zones and/or loud noise. Consider planting a line of evergreens such as American or yaupon hollies to create a natural fence-line if needed.

Choose your Outdoor Classroom Site(s)

After reviewing your potential outdoor classroom sites, your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant will help you determine which site(s) would provide the best outdoor classroom location. Try to choose one central location for your outdoor classroom site instead of having the outdoor learning stations spread out over your campus. After filling out your Site Evaluation Form, mark the location of the potential outdoor classroom site(s) you hope to develop on your campus map.

Site Approval Form

Once an outdoor classroom site is chosen, your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant will submit a Site Approval Form and Google Earth map of the site. These must be reviewed and signed by your principal and your school system's Buildings and Maintenance Supervisor to verify where any underground hazards or utility lines are located so the utilities can be marked on the outdoor classroom schematic and avoided during the construction phase.

Amy Clark

You do not have to locate your outdoor classroom near the wildlife habitat that is already on your campus. The AWF can help your school develop habitat to attract backyard wildlife.

After you have chosen the site for your outdoor classroom, you should also evaluate the wildlife habitat in the outdoor classroom area to determine what habitat resources are already present and what resources could be easily added to enhance the habitat. Below are some suggestions on how to evaluate your school's wildlife habitat.

Wildlife Habitat Tips

An outdoor classroom created and certified through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program must provide habitat for local backyard wildlife, including the following:

❑ Food

Everyone needs to eat! Planting native forbs, shrubs, and trees is the easiest (and cheapest) way to provide the foliage, nectar, pollen, and mast (seeds, berries, acorns and nuts) that many species of wildlife require to survive and thrive. The ideal wildlife management plan uses locally native vegetation to meet the year-round needs of wildlife.

❑ Water

Wildlife needs sources of clean water for many purposes including drinking, bathing, and reproduction. Water sources may include natural features such as ponds, streams, or wetlands. Many species including salamanders, frogs, toads, and insects (like dragonflies) begin life in water and are unlikely to prosper in your outdoor classroom without a safe, healthy water environment.

❑ Cover

Just as people need the shelter of a house, wildlife require protective cover to remain safe from people, predators, and inclement weather. The easiest way to provide cover for terrestrial wildlife is by using native vegetation, both dead and alive. Plants ranging in size and density from ground cover to tall, mature trees, including both evergreen and deciduous plants, provides birds and other wildlife with the appropriate cover for feeding, hiding, mating and reproductive activities. Densely branched shrubs, thickets, and brush piles provide great hiding places within their bushy leaves and thorns, while other wildlife may use tree cavities in snags (dead trees), leaf litter, fallen limbs, rotting logs, and rock piles as cover.

❑ Places to Raise Young

Many places for cover can double as a sheltered place where wildlife can raise their young away from predators and inclement weather. For example, many butterflies use wildflower meadows for protection from wind and as "host plants" to lay their eggs. A brush pile can provide cover for rabbits and their young. However, some wildlife require an alternative to the cover they use during non-reproductive times such as cavity nesting birds that require snags with natural cavities for nesting or frogs that need a pond to raise their young (tadpoles).

A yaupon or American holly is an evergreen bush that provides berries in the winter, nesting sites for birds in the spring, and year-round cover from inclement weather and predators. The holly in this photo was home to a robin's nest.

Habitat Assessment

Once your outdoor classroom site is chosen, you need to work with your students to determine what habitat already exists and what habitat resources you want to add. To do this, use the Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips and habitat assessment activities on the Alabama Wildlife Federation website.

Below are basic steps you will need to take to conduct your habitat assessment:.

- ❑ **Determine** which backyard wildlife species are native to your area.
- ❑ **Identify** which of those species you would like to attract to your schoolyard habitat.
- ❑ **Research** the habitat needs of the species you chose.
- ❑ **Assess** whether or not your outdoor classroom already includes those habitat resources.
- ❑ If the outdoor classroom lacks specific resources, **create** a plan for how you will add those resources to the habitat.

Below are resources that your students can use for the habitat assessment:

- Watchable Wildlife section of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources website
- *National Audubon Society Regional Guide to the Southeastern States*
- *Alabama Wildlife* book series by Ralph Mirarchi

If you need on-site assistance, contact your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant.

Proven Tips to Reduce Vandalism

- ❑ Involve students in the design, development, use and maintenance of the outdoor classroom so that they will take ownership in the project and want to protect it.
- ❑ If possible, try to have all of your outdoor classroom learning stations in one central area (like a courtyard) instead of spreading them out around the campus so that you can keep an eye on it more easily.
- ❑ Keep your outdoor classroom clean and free of litter to reduce the possibility of future littering. Ask the custodians if you can keep a garbage can in the outdoor classroom area that they will empty daily or weekly.
- ❑ Consider the location of your outdoor classroom and how easily it can be monitored as most vandalized areas are also the most secluded. Make sure that the area has appropriate lighting since vandals are less likely to strike in a well-lit area.
- ❑ Properly located entrances, exits, fencing, and landscaping can direct both foot and automobile traffic to discourage crime.
- ❑ Signs can be great deterrents. Post an "Outdoor Classroom Rules" sign near the entrance to the outdoor classroom so that everyone will know what rules to follow and a "For School Use Only" sign to discourage unwanted visitors if needed.
- ❑ Incorporate an educational sign beside each outdoor learning station to explain the purpose of the learning station, and utilize plant identification signs to identify specific plants and explain how these plants provide food and shelter for wildlife.
- ❑ Fence the entire outdoor classroom area if possible—not necessarily to deter entrance into the outdoor classroom area, but rather to delineate the area as "special" so that students, faculty and community members know they are entering an area that should be treated with respect.
- ❑ If your outdoor classroom area is fenced, consider locking the fence with a combination lock and giving the combination to the faculty members. If you use a key lock, place the key in a convenient location that is easily accessible to all teachers - not in another teacher's room.
- ❑ Involve the community and make your neighbors aware of your outdoor classroom. The more eyes and ears that you have monitoring your outdoor classroom the better.
- ❑ Educate your students, faculty, parents and school volunteers about the importance of creating wildlife habitat for the school and the community. Hold an outdoor classroom "Open House," conduct a "bug count," offer "habitat tours," host "celebrations," and organize "Clean Up Days."
- ❑ Make sure everyone understands that vandalism is a crime and that crime and that vandalism will be reported to the police.
- ❑ If vandalized, clean up immediately, report it to the police, and then continue to counsel and educate the students about the importance of your schoolyard wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom.

Outdoor Classroom Rules Signs (left pic) and educational signs that explain the purpose of the learning stations (right pic) help teachers, students and parents better understand the purpose of the schoolyard wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom.