

Rachel Nabors  
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Environmental Education Alliance  
Annual Conference

The EEA conference for this year was held March 3 – 5 at the Gwinnett Heritage Center. Attendees included educators and students from across the southeast. My intention for the conference was to build relationships, network and learn more about environmental issues and how to teach others about them. The classes I attended were impactful in ways I was not expecting. I analyzed my personal beliefs and motives and feel as though I have a better understanding of how to teach to a variety of different groups.

The first day was very exciting. I was unable to sign up ahead of time for any workshops since the ticket was paid for through the school, so my schedule was wide open. The opening remarks for the weekend made me feel welcome and gave me a better idea of what to expect. The first class I went to was the Tread Lightly Awareness workshop. I chose this workshop because I value Leave No trace principles and wanted to learn how the Tread Lightly ethics compared. Avery and Casey Chipka were very enthusiastic and opened the discussion by asking if anyone knew what Tread Lightly was – and not many people did. They explained that Tread Lightly focuses on reaching out to recreational users and being nonjudgmental to how people use the land. Avery focused specifically on ATV users and how they have a bad reputation within the larger community of recreational land consumers. He said there is a tendency to group these people together; if one ATV user goes off trail, then all ATV users are bad and ATVs should be banned. This workshop helped me develop a deeper understanding of my own biases and how I view others who use the land. Casey went in depth about how we must respect other's recreational choices and build a relationship to educate them if they are negatively impacting the environment. They ended the workshop by showing us where we can gain access to their resources and informing us on different grants they offer.

The last workshop I attended on Friday was for Project Learning Tree and Climate Change. In the class, we did a variety of PLT activities that addressed Climate Change and then discussed how these activities could be adapted for different age groups. One of the activities that I thoroughly enjoyed challenged the class to explain your point of view with someone who felt the complete opposite. This allowed the class to see how difficult it can be to compromise on such a sensitive and complex issue, but that it is indeed possible. Both of the workshops I attended on Friday urged me to analyze how I approach those I do not agree with and how necessary it is to open up dialogue and respect other's opinions. Someone said during one of the climate change activities that no one's mind will ever be changed from an argument. Friday ended with a casual game night where I was able to connect with other people who have worked in Jackson Hole and discuss job opportunities this summer.

Saturday morning was very emotional for me. The key note address explained the disconnect we have with mother nature. Christopher Uhl studied ecological healing in the amazon and explained that the environment is resilient, so the conversation with environmental education becomes more about our relationship with the natural world. He explained that the destruction in the environment is a manifestation of inner conflict. He

mentioned the language we use for the environment and said that it contributes to our disconnection. He referred to the environment as mother nature – a she not an it. His key note address strengthened my own personal belief about the growing division between humans and their environment.

The first class I attended on Saturday was EE in Communities of Color. I chose this workshop because I feel as though there is a lack of diversity in this field and I wanted to dig deeper into why. Darryl Haddock spoke about how people interact differently with their environment based on their experiences with the environment. For instance, if the outdoors are associated with crime, you may fear going outside. This class made me realize how privileged I am to be able to enjoy the outdoors through school and leisure. Darryl works for the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance and he explained that to encourage the community to interact with their environment, he has had to gain their trust and meet them where they are at. Ultimately, there needs to be a progression of exposure to the outdoors. You can not take someone who is genuinely afraid of their environment on a multi-day backpacking trip and expect a positive response; there are barriers to learning that must be acknowledged, respected and slowly broken down. As an aspiring environmental educator, I need to understand that building trust and remaining patient are crucial to being able to educate and provide meaningful experiences.

Saturday afternoon was spent going to Digging into Dead Stuff, Storytelling and EE Activities: Very Popular Planet. These classes all focused on how to teach the topics and how they impact students. Digging into Dead Stuff was exciting and fun because we examined logs and identified different bugs we found. Storytelling reminded me how beneficial it can be for little kids to educate them through stories and the final activity allowed us to explore different ways we can educate students about their ecological footprint. The afternoon concluded with the Sip and Stroll, which allowed me to speak with GCSU alum and potential employers around the Southeast! On Sunday I took the opportunity to do the Buzzard Hike so I could explore the area. This allowed me some time to reflect on what environmental education means to me and how I am incorporating it into my own life.

As an Outdoor Education major, I am surrounded with people who appreciate and use the outdoors, but I always struggle with how I can encourage others to care, too. This conference encouraged me to step back and analyze my own biases and judgments about how others use the land. It made me realize that I cannot expect people to have the same values as me, and I definitely cannot demand they act a certain way. I believe that change starts with education, which starts with building relationships. When I approach people, demanding them will not foster change. I should listen to hear their concerns and motives, so that I can understand them, gain their trust and build a relationship. By doing this, I believe I could have the opportunity to show them how incredible mother nature is and allow the experience to speak for itself.

#### Conference Events Attended:

1. Friday:
  - a. Opening remarks
  - b. Tread Lightly Workshop
  - c. Project Learning
  - d. Film Festival

- e. Closing Remarks
- f. Friday Family Game Night
- 2. Saturday:
  - a. Opening Remarks
  - b. Key Note
  - c. EE to Communities of Color
  - d. Digging into Dead Stuff
  - e. Storytelling: Imagine, Connect, Inspire
  - f. EE Activities: Very Popular Planet
  - g. Sip and Stroll
- 3. Sunday:
  - a. Opening Remarks
  - b. Buzzard Hike