Hudson-Harbor Educators Work Group

February 12, 2026

Minutes

Shared Google Folder: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/13SSRnA9UtYWNGbBbxGX-o0qyYZKRdIRE?usp=sharing

Attendance: Mary Leou (NYU), Quin Hricik (NYU), Alaina Pribis (Randalls Island), Sophie Carman (NYSDEC), Cheyann Coleman (Bronx River Alliance), Alisa D'Souza (NYSDEC),Chris Bowser (NYSDEC), Christina Tobitsch (CURB), Furhana Husani (Waterfront Alliance), Hugh Carola (Hackensack Riverkeeper), Jennifer Kepler (GCC), Judith Velosky (NYC Parks), Kristin Schreiber (BOP), Bibi Calderaro (NCA), Haley McClanahan (BBP), Ian Clearly (NYSDEC), Laurel Zaima-Sheehly (Columbia), Marieke Bender (BPCA), Shino Tanikawa (NYCSWCD), Fadwa Yousef (NYSDEC), Hart Munkin (NCA), Nebraska Hernadez (NCA), Rosana Pedra Nobre (HEP), Hason Fernandez (Bronx River Alliance), Jessica Miner (NYS Parks), Mayra Sanchet (NYSDEC), Al Larriva-Latt (NYS Parks), Toland Kister (HRP), Sophie German (NYSDEC), Ciara Scully (NYS Parks), Rachel Swason (HRP), Tina Walsh (HRP), Tess Wenstrup (NCA), Ian Goza (South Street Seaport), Noelle Thurlow (Resilience Adventures), Marissa Annuziato (LDEO)

NYU's Beast Practices for Outdoor Lesson Design

- Workshop led by Dr. Mary Leou and Quin Hricik
- Focus on lesson planning, inclusive teaching, accessibility, place-based education, assessment methods, and sharing best practices.

Key Takeaways: Addressing Challenges in Outdoor Education Lessons

- Start with clear goals and objectives
    - Without clear goals, outdoor lessons can drift and lose impact—clarity provides focus in open, unpredictable environments.
    - Identify essential big ideas that every learner must understand, regardless of learning style or ability.
    - Design multiple pathways to the same outcome so activities can shift in method, pace, or complexity without compromising the core learning.
- Make learning genuinely relevant
    - If content is not meaningful or clearly connected to students' lives, it simply won't sink in.
    - Explicitly explain why a concept matters—whether it relates to community health, local ecosystems, personal wellbeing, or family life.
    - Use place-based examples to show how local systems function, how communities respond to crises (e.g., extreme weather), and what resilience looks like.
    - Include relevance not only in understanding the issue but also in what actions students can take—especially around environmental issues to reduce climate anxiety and build agency.
- Empower students with actionable steps
    - Many young people feel overwhelmed or hopeless about environmental challenges.

    - Provide clear, age-appropriate actions they can take, reinforcing that they are capable of contributing to solutions.
    - Actionable learning builds confidence, reduces anxiety, and strengthens emotional connection to nature.
- Commit to culturally responsive teaching
    - Cultural responsiveness is harder in short-term programs, but still essential.
    - Assess who your audience is—linguistically, culturally, and experientially—and adjust instruction accordingly.
    - Incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into content (e.g., connecting suspension bridge history to Latin American innovation).
    - Honor students as knowledge-holders: ask about the trees, weather, or nature in their home countries; allow space for shared stories.
    - When language is a barrier, pivot creatively—invite translations, use multilingual vocabulary sharing, and co-create meaning.
    - These moments are not distractions—they strengthen engagement, belonging, and mutual respect.
- Prioritize inclusion and accessibility
    - Accessibility is often under-considered in outdoor and environmental education, and resources can be limited.
    - Design programs with a strengths-based mindset: focus on what each learner can do and how they can participate meaningfully.
    - Draw from education, disability studies, and inclusive frameworks—not just natural science—to create well-rounded, thoughtful programming.
    - Recognize that educators bring varied backgrounds (science, education, fieldwork), and use this diversity as an opportunity for skill-sharing and collective growth.
- Sustain emotional, cognitive, and experiential impact
    - Outdoor learning should cultivate affective growth—values, attitudes, and emotional connection—not just factual knowledge.
    - Encourage reflection on place, identity, responsibility, and community interdependence.
    - Support continuity over time so learning builds across experiences and feels connected, not episodic.
- Stay flexible, adaptable, and attentive
    - Weather changes, group needs shift, and outdoor environments are dynamic—successful educators adjust with creativity and intention.
    - Continuously scan for who is engaged, who is struggling, and which learners may need a different entry point.
    - Being responsive in the moment is as important as planning ahead.
- Teach as a partner, not just an expert
    - Position yourself alongside learners—curious, observant, and open to their experiences and expertise.
    - Students bring valuable knowledge from their homes, cultures, and lived environments; affirm it and integrate it whenever possible.

- Assessment Strategies
    - Pre/post quizzes can work, but…
    - Arts-based assessments (PSA drawings, chalk murals, stop-motion videos, documentaries) reveal deeper understanding and emotions.
    - Word clouds help analyze themes from open-ended responses.
    - Mapping exercises address persistent geographic misconceptions.

Small Group Discussion – Activity and Share Out

Strengths

- Hands-on, sensory-focused learning.
- Place-based lessons tailored to unique sites.
- Opportunities for self-discovery and interpretation.
- Gamification and multiple "access points" for learners.

Challenges

- Weather, noise, unpredictable wildlife ("nature not naturing").
- Multilingual classes and translation limits.
- Student fear of nature or water.
- Balancing rigor with accessible content.
- Site-specific constraints requiring lesson redesign.

Opportunities

- Provide take-home stewardship tools (e.g., seeds).
- Encourage behavior change over time.
- Focus on one core learning goal instead of information overload.

Peer Reflections

Jennifer Kepler – Gowanus Canal Conservancy

- Shifted from grade-specific trips to K–12 adaptable programs.
- Used NGSS Appendix H to design scalable objectives.
- Flexibility improved staff engagement and equity for students.
- Created generalized pre/post materials for teachers.

Hugh Carola – Hackensack Riverkeeper

- Shared stories illustrating adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and safety education.
- Demonstrated importance of gentle guidance (e.g., preventing unsafe crabbing, dispelling fears of harmless animals).

Future Considerations

Artificial Intelligence in Environmental Education

- Potential uses: species ID apps (already common), data collection, enhanced teaching tools.
- Need to address environmental justice considerations.
- Suggested as topic for future workshop.

Announcements/Next Steps

- NYU Wallerstein Water Stories Film Showcase (deadline April 10; screening in June).

- Billion Oyster Project Student Symposium (seeking guest reviewers; May 20).
- WIFIT (Watershed Forestry Institute for Teachers) applications open.
- River Works curriculum available online.
- Rachel Swanson will assume the role of co-chair for the Harbor Educator Group as Tina transitions roles.
- Quarterly meetings will continue; feedback is encouraged.