

Introduction to the Schoolyard Program

The FWC's schoolyard program is one of the oldest state level schoolyard programs in the United States. The program began with the development of the *Handbook to Schoolyard Plants and Animals of North Central Florida* in 1990. This handbook serves as an expanded field guide to the natural history, ecology, and behavior of the most common organisms found in north central Florida schoolyards. The book is distributed free to participants attending Commission-sponsored schoolyard workshops and is also available for purchase.

Response to the *Handbook* was overwhelmingly positive and educators expressed a great interest in the development of an activity guide containing schoolyard-based lessons focusing on the organisms covered in the *Handbook*. This interest led to the publication of the *Schoolyard Wildlife Activity Guide* in 1992. This guide contains 35 field-tested activities designed specifically for elementary age children. Once these two books were completed, a schoolyard activities/ecology workshop component was developed. Response to the *Activity Guide* and the workshop component was also overwhelmingly positive and educators identified the need for a third book focusing on the process of restoring and enhancing school grounds as wildlife habitats. This need was addressed with the development of the *Schoolyard Ecosystems for Florida* guidebook in 1995. This book walks educators through the entire process of planning, installing, maintaining and using restored schoolyard ecosystem sites as outdoor learning centers. Once this book was completed, an additional schoolyard ecosystems workshop component was developed for dissemination of the *Schoolyard Ecosystems* guidebook. The fourth and final component of the schoolyard program arose as a result of increased concern for the proper protection and management of Florida's threatened water resources and an interest in the development of schoolyard-based lessons focusing on water-related issues. This concern led to the development of the 11-lesson *Water Resources Activity Pack* in 1996. The *Water Resources Activity Pack* is also distributed free of charge to schoolyard workshop participants.

Funding for the development of the *Handbook* and *Activity Guide* was provided by the Commission's Nongame Wildlife Grant Program. Funding for the development of the *Schoolyard Ecosystems* guidebook was provided by the Florida Advisory Council on Environmental Education and the Southwest Florida and South Florida Water Management Districts. The Southwest and South Florida Water Management Districts also provided funding for the development of the *Water Resources Activity Pack*. Printing and dissemination of all four of these books and management of the workshop components is the responsibility of the Commission's K-12 Education Program and is overseen by the state Project WILD coordinator. To date, approximately 55 certified facilitators have conducted over 440 schoolyard activities and schoolyard ecosystem workshops throughout the state and more than 8,000 educators have participated in Schoolyard Activities, Schoolyard Ecosystems, or combined workshops.

The schoolyard program consists of two major workshop components: schoolyard activities/ecology workshops and schoolyard ecosystems workshops. Ideally, classroom teachers and other workshop participants should successfully complete the schoolyard activities component before receiving schoolyard ecosystem training. Although the schoolyard activities component and the schoolyard ecosystems component are related to, and complement, each other they are distinct programs focusing on different educational and environmental goals.

The schoolyard activities workshop is designed to introduce teachers and others to the natural history of the many unique and fascinating plants, animals, and even fungi commonly found in Florida schoolyards. From an environmental perspective, this workshop is designed to promote a greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of these organisms and the important ecological roles they play. The ultimate environmental goal of the schoolyard activities workshop is to promote more positive behavior toward all native schoolyard organisms, including snakes, spiders, frogs, worms, and native weeds. From an educational perspective, this workshop is designed to show teachers how to use their schoolyards as outdoor classrooms for the study of basic ecological concepts. The ultimate educational goal of the schoolyard activities workshop is to provide teachers with the background knowledge, activity ideas, and instructional and behavior management skills they need to successfully implement a wide variety of outdoor schoolyard activities with their own students.

The schoolyard ecosystems workshop is designed to show teachers and others how to enhance and/or restore native ecosystems on their school grounds. From an environmental perspective, this workshop is designed to promote a greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of native ecosystems and their ecological importance in our rapidly developing state. The ultimate environmental goal of the schoolyard ecosystems workshop is the restoration and preservation of viable wildlife habitat and native ecosystems on school grounds. From an educational perspective, this workshop is designed to show participants how to plan, design, install, and maintain native ecosystems on school grounds. The ultimate educational goal of the schoolyard ecosystems workshop is to provide participants with the information, skills, and confidence they need to successfully spearhead a school-based ecosystem development/restoration effort. The FWC's schoolyard program offers two different hands-on, interactive workshops. These workshops can be offered together or they can be offered separately. Workshops can only be conducted by qualified facilitators who have completed formal schoolyard program facilitator training.