

The term “sustainable development” was introduced in the early 1980s and advanced by the 1987 *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, more popularly known as the *Brundtland Report* after the Commission’s chairperson. This report stated that “humanity has the ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

International commitment to environmental education took another step forward in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. At this historic environmental event 179 heads of government—including the prime minister of Canada—signed on to *Agenda 21: The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, a global environmental guide for the twenty-first century. Chapter 36 of the document is entitled “Promoting Education, Public Awareness, and Training.” The Rio World Summit was followed by other international environmental conferences in Montreal and Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1997, and by the 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Each of these forums invited and promised further commitments to environmental education. **Agenda 21** had emphasized the importance of improving the environmental literacy of all citizens through formal, non-formal, and informal modes of education. Following the Johannesburg “Rio+10” conference, the UN declared the period from 2005 to 2015 as “a decade of environmental learning.”

Environmental Education in Canada and Ontario

Within the elementary school curriculum in Canada, environmental education in the 1960s emphasized nature study, environmental studies, and the outdoors. Courses in environmental science were introduced into the secondary school curriculum. In the late 1960s, William A. Andrews developed an environmental education program at the University of Toronto. This was followed by other university programs, and the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced environmental science courses for grades seven to twelve in 1973. The principles of ecology and environmental citizenship were added to EE courses in the 1970s. Additional environmental education efforts were initiated by organizations such the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and various parks agencies. These contributed to a flourishing of environmental and outdoor education that lasted until the late 1980s.

In the view of many educators, changes in the 1990s to the Ontario education system reduced both the opportunities for and the effectiveness of environmental and outdoor education in schools. Additionally, when a new provincial curriculum was introduced during the same period, environmental science was eliminated as a stand-alone course in high schools. Although the new elementary and secondary curricula include topics in ecology and environment, there is a lack of content on values, attitudes, and stewardship. Supporters of environmental education are critical of a decreasing interest in EE by boards of education and government, a shift in priorities to get “back to the basics,” and budget cuts that have reduced or eliminated outdoor education. A survey called “Educating for Sustainability: The Status of Sustainable Development



Education in Canada,” produced by the Council of Ministers of Education in 2000, indicated that, apart from some support in Manitoba and New Brunswick, environmental and sustainability education was not a priority in provincial education policies.

Despite these setbacks, there are positive developments. Teacher associations such as the Ontario Society for Environmental Education, the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario, and the Ontario Association of Geography and Environmental Education, along with many other individuals and organizations, continue to champion environmental and outdoor education. The Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communication was created in 1993. As well, an *Environmental Bill of Rights* was passed by Ontario in 1994, guaranteeing the right to environmental information and requiring “Statements of Environmental Values” from a number of provincial ministries. In 1999, the Toronto District School Board established Canada’s first dedicated Department of Environmental Education in a public school board, supported by a board-wide environment policy and an EcoSchools Program.

Public consultations carried out across the country in 2000 by Environment Canada led to the publication of *A Framework for Environmental Learning and Sustainability*. The *Framework* identifies needs and strategies to achieve **ecological literacy** and to support sustainable living. A key feature of the document is the emphasis that Canadians place on linking values and ethics to environmental learning. Together with several corporate partners, Environment Canada announced plans to help publicize and network many organizations that are developing environmental action plans, and provide a central clearinghouse website for environmental education information.



Recognition of the fragility of the Earth’s natural systems and the urgency of many environmental problems might appear to provide a sufficient basis for support for environmental and sustainability education for every citizen. However, that support has not been readily given. Competing interests, the political nature of environmental issues, and short-sightedness have, in many parts of the world, meant that E&SE is given little attention or has diminished in scope. Critics of E&SE have cited scientific inaccuracy, lack of standards, and bias as problems within the field. Proponents of E&SE believe these criticisms need to be met with more attention to quality programs, resources, and stronger public and official support.

With the founding of Environmental Education Ontario (EEON) in 2000, public support for the growth and development of E&SE, on a provincial basis, received a new groundswell of commitment.

