

HANDS-ON DESIGN FOR HANDS-ON LEARNING WITH YOUTH IN SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA- A CASE STUDY IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Wyoming County in southern West Virginia is an economically and ecologically compromised area long dependent on extractive industries. Public space for recreation, community building and education is dwindling as non-resident landowners, controlling eighty-five percent of predominantly forested landscapes, continue a trend of physical enclosure and controlled access to previously quasi-public areas. In particular, children lack local access to the experience of nature and the ability to interact with their environment within an educational setting. Identifying opportunities and devoting space for outdoor learning, especially in STEM fields, is a concern of local educators who desire project-based learning opportunities to increase student interest, motivation and performance. Faculty and students from West Virginia University (WVU) landscape architecture program joined with WVU Extension's local 4H, Friends of the Earth (a high school environmental club), Groundwork Wyoming County (a local non-profit), and the Upper Guyandotte Watershed Association to develop a vision for the design of an outdoor classroom at Wolf Pen, WV along Indian Creek to be funded by the private landowner Cliffs Natural Resources, a significant local employer. The 'site understanding' activities and following design process integrated ecological assays, cultural landscape exploration, site ritual, and abstract art production. This process sought to create a transformative experience for students in designing the outdoor classroom- and create a model process for participatory design with youth.