

# Youth in Michigan's Upper Peninsula Learn about Environmental Stewardship through Place-Based Education

By Jennifer Eberbach *21c3 Asset: Education*

Michigan Municipal League

<http://www.mml.org/resources/publications/mmr/issue/janfeb2011/copper-county.html>

K-12 students in small communities across Michigan's western Upper Peninsula are "outspoken" stewards of their environment.

What better childhood lesson is there than to teach kids "your actions matter?" Environmental stewardship projects throughout Copper Country in the western Upper Peninsula are teaching this lesson to young students.

Lake Perrault near Painesdale, MI was trashed from one too many parties on the beach. Broken glass hidden in the sand made it hard for residents to enjoy their local trout lake, until a group of stewards emerged and turned it all around. In the last three years, Jeffers High School students and some middle school students have cleaned up the lake, built trails, created interpretive signage, monitored the water, and surveyed the wildlife at Lake Perrault and the adjacent Robert T. Brown Nature Sanctuary—just two miles away from their school.



Community work day at the Calumet Laurium and Keweenaw Elementary community garden.

## LAKE SUPERIOR STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVE

Jeffers High School's stewards and other school-community teams are coordinated by the Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative (LSSI) each year. LSSI is one of eight 'place-based' education hubs in Michigan established by the statewide Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (GLSI) (see article in the November/December issue of *The Review*). Since launching in 2007, the effort has gotten K-12 students all over Michigan out in their local environments during the school day, learning the curriculum.

LSSI's regional reach covers small communities (mostly 5,000 people or less) spread out across a vast swath of the western U.P. It currently supports 15 school-community teams in the Houghton, Hancock, Adams Township, Chassell Township, Calumet, Baraga, L'Anse, Lake Linden, and Copper City areas. The program doles out mini grants to teachers who are coordinating community-based learning projects that use the local environment as an extension of the classroom.

"In science class, for example, students learn about the water cycle. The best way to do that, in my mind, is to take them out to see their local watershed and teach them how the water cycle works in the watershed of the Great Lakes," says LSSI Program Director Shawn Oppliger.

Teachers (and sometimes students) come up with ideas for local environmental stewardship projects and apply for funding from LSSI. However, they could not do it without the help of community partners. Villages and townships have partnered with schools. Nature preserve land owners like the Keweenaw Land Trust have given

student access to natural resources. University programs like MSU Extension have gotten involved, and numerous businesses and organizations serving the western U.P. have contributed their expertise as well.

## **NATIVE AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP**

A cultural asset available to K-12 students in the Baraga and L’Anse area is the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. C.J. Sullivan Elementary School in L’Anse has partnered with the Native American reservation, as well as other community partners, to build and maintain nature trails and study wildlife around Lightfoot Bay and nearby areas. The collaboration acknowledges the large Native American student population who attend the school and the benefit of having a community resource like the reservation around to learn from.



## **STUDENTS AND SENIORS COMMUNITY GARDENS**

Building community gardens on school property is a popular type of project that multiple LSSI teachers and community partners have coordinated. Calumet, Laurium and Keweenaw Elementary (CLK) in Calumet teamed with Hughes Organic Farm, grocery store Pat’s Food, after-school program Great Explorations, and MSU Extension to install raised vegetable beds outside of the school. Young students in Calumet are helping senior citizens to grow their own community plots in the school’s gardens and collecting oral histories from older residents about the plentiful Depression Era community gardens that once populated the area.

“Calumet is a mining town that had huge community gardens in the 1920s and 30s. Students are out collecting oral histories now before [that generation] passes away. It is an extension of environmental stewardship that connects kids to both the past and present and helps them learn to appreciate the knowledge that is out there for them to learn about local history,” she explains.

In addition to stewardship projects for students, LSSI also offers professional development and support to teachers. Summer institutes, workshops, grant writing help, and other types of help are available throughout the year. For example, “A lot of teachers have been interested in school gardens, so we decided they would benefit from a series of workshops on how to do it,” Oppliger explains.

## **GREAT LAKES STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVE’S REACH**

LSSI is a program administered by the Western U.P. Center for Science, Mathematics, and Environmental Education, one of 33 state funded centers in Michigan. When GLSI formed in 2007, they designated the Western U.P. Center as one of their ‘place-based’ education hubs. Oppliger thinks it was a good choice for a hub because “we’ve been doing related environmental education, since 2000. We serve two intermediate school districts and the 19 school districts in them, in five counties. We already had a good relationship with the schools and knew a lot of the teachers. We were well known in our schools for professional teacher development and the services that we do,” she explains.

When “the kids take ownership of the works they’ve done,” Oppliger is particularly pleased. “They become outspoken advocates for stewardship” that can teach a lesson to the rest of us, she says. Really, who wants to throw litter on a beach that the kids just spent time cleaning up?

Place-based education immerses students in what is local—the environment, culture, heritage and art of a specific place—and uses those unique characteristics of a community as the basis for the study of language arts, social studies, science, mathematics, and art.

*Jennifer Eberbach is a freelance journalist and professional copywriter. You may contact her at 734-929-2964 or visit her online at [www.jenthewriter.info](http://www.jenthewriter.info).*