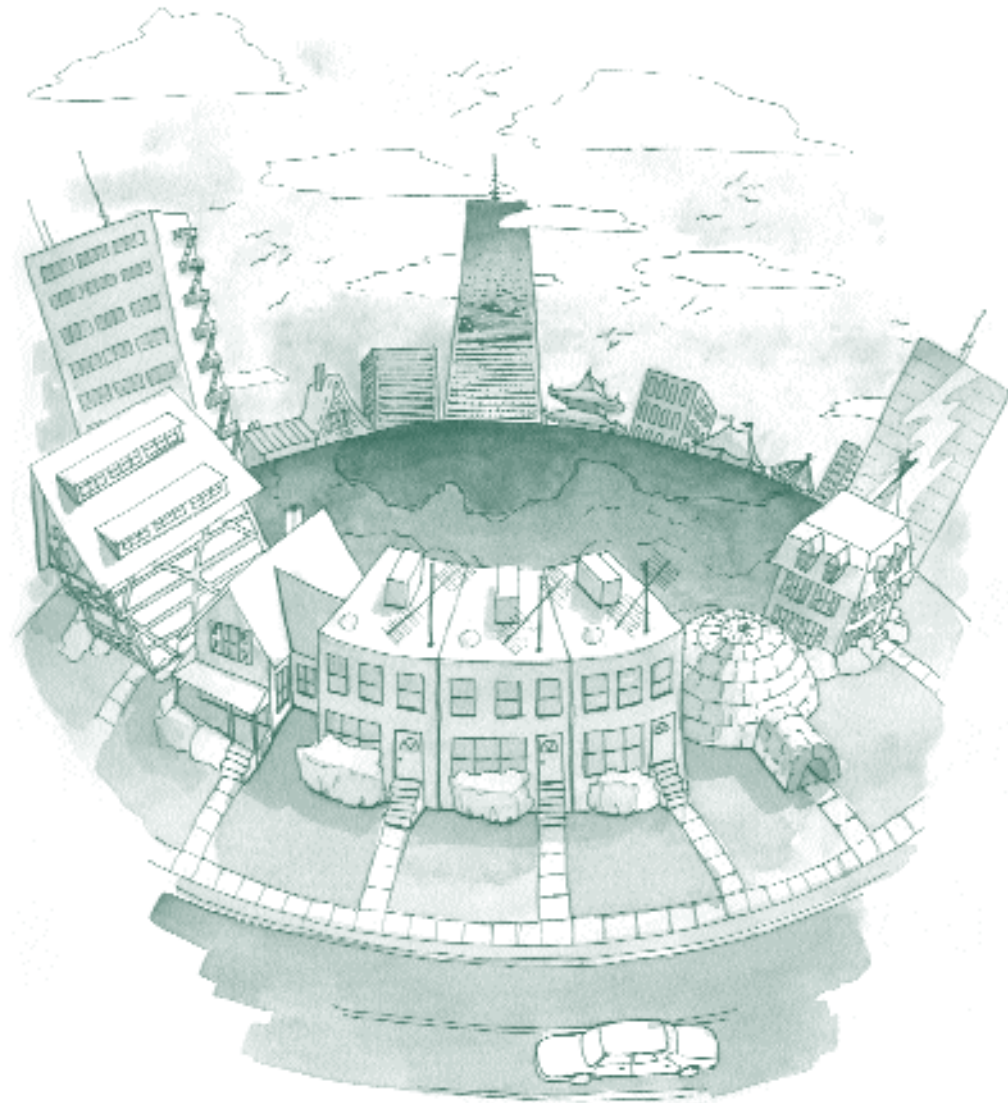


# HOW BIG IS YOUR BACKYARD ?



by Abby Kidder

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## **RESEARCH**

Our work at the Institute is based on the analysis of real-life dilemmas that have been contributed by children and adults. If you have been faced with a compelling ethical dilemma, or if a student has related one to you, we invite you to send it to us here at the Institute for Global Ethics.





# HOW BIG IS YOUR BACKYARD ?

*How Big is Your Backyard?* is a secondary-school curriculum funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation. This curriculum builds on the findings of a project carried out by the Institute for Global Ethics and the Gallup Organization, called *Reaching Out: Broadening College Student Constituencies for Environmental Protection*. The project surveyed 763 nonactivist college students in March 2000 to find out what today's young adults think about the environment. The survey asked about the relationship between these students' core values and their environmental interests, and how the environmental community might better shape messages to draw more inactive students into its ranks.

The findings from this survey helped shape the design and content of *How Big is Your Backyard?*. This environmental science curriculum has been crafted with the assumption that giving students the tools to identify and grapple with the ethics of environmental issues in middle and high school will increase their active engagement in environmental issues when in college and as adults.

*How Big is Your Backyard?* builds on these findings from the *Reaching Out* survey telling us about today's nonactivist college students.

- **College students share a set of ethical values that gives top ranking to honesty, responsibility, and respect.** This curriculum begins with students building their code of ethics based on their core shared values, continues by asking students to put these values into action, and concludes with working through environmental dilemmas that are caused by the conflict between a person's core values.
- **College students are already convinced that the environment is deteriorating.** We do not need to tell students that the environment is in danger and needs attention. They know this, and as they explore their local outdoor environments throughout this curriculum, they begin to articulate these problems and look for solutions.
- **College students are more persuaded by arguments to "balance humanity and nature" than to adopt "limits to growth" or to assert "dominion over nature."** The decision-making component in this curriculum guides students through a

process of engaging in moral dialogue that builds on accurate and well-balanced information. By moving away from right-versus-wrong arguments, to right-versus-right civil discourse, students are asked to explore the middle ground and recognize that environmental dilemmas are not black and white.

- **College students are more willing to protect the environment due to a “transcendent principle” than because of pragmatism (access to resources) or aesthetics (access to beauty or recreation).** The college students surveyed felt compelled by the intrinsic worth of the natural environment. This curriculum uses experiential approaches to build students’ connection to the natural environments in a community.
- **College students would participate more in environmental activities if they had more information, time, or assurance that it would make a difference.** By participating in environmental activities during the school day through this curriculum, students will be beginning to practice involvement. They will also be given the time to do so both during school and after school for their homework assignments. The hope here is that students will recognize the need for engagement, and by studying those who have made a difference, understand the effectiveness of engagement. An engagement begun at this age can be carried through the rest of their lives.
- **College students are uninterested in government as either a cause or as a solution to problems, but they say they are willing to pay higher taxes if the money would go towards protecting the environment.** In identifying and analyzing environmental dilemmas, secondary students will debate the role of government and recognize that not all cases are equal. In some situations they may feel the government is an obvious and necessary cause or solution to a problem, while in other cases they may feel differently. The lesson on this point is in learning to be discerning citizens.

The *Reaching Out* report may be viewed and downloaded in its entirety at <http://www.globalethics.org>.