



# Sycamore Land Trust

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## Environmental Education Program

### Statement of Purpose

#### Purpose and Mission

Sycamore Land Trust is a regional non-profit organization whose mission is to preserve the disappearing natural and agricultural landscapes of southern Indiana. Sycamore protects land by acquiring ownership through donation or purchase, or by holding conservation easements on privately owned land. Established in 1990, Sycamore works in 26 counties in southern Indiana, the largest coverage area of the state's regional land trusts. Over the last ten years, Sycamore has experienced a period of rapid growth, and is now one of the fastest growing conservation groups in the Midwest.

Sycamore Land Trust views its mission more broadly than simply protecting natural land for wildlife, and thus invests in the region's future through its Environmental Education Program.

Sycamore Land Trust believes that building an appreciation for nature is critical to our mission of protecting land and to creating a healthier Hoosier landscape. By providing environmental education to people of all ages, we increase the number who understand the value of nature and are therefore more likely to take steps to protect it. Environmental education also enables us to reach new audiences and strengthen our work overall.

Sycamore Land Trust's Environmental Education Program serves two goals:

- 1) First and foremost, provide high-quality environmental education for children, students, and the general public to help connect people to nature and create the next generation of conservationists.
- 2) Advance Sycamore's land protection work by building greater awareness of the importance of land conservation and restoration. As more people learn about Sycamore through our Environmental Education Program, we expect to gain new members, volunteers, and land projects.

The mission of Sycamore's Environmental Education Program is to help people of all ages understand, appreciate, and connect with nature so that they are inspired to protect it.

## Leadership

A full-time Environmental Education director will run the program. The director will develop and work with a robust Environmental Education Committee to set priorities, respond to opportunities and challenges, and expand the capacity of the program and the organization. Additionally, the director will recruit and train volunteers (including retired and current educators and natural resource professionals) to assist with or lead program activities. The education director will report to the Executive Director, and is expected to coordinate with other staff members to maximize program effectiveness and benefits to the organization.

## Description

The program serves students and members of the public, including adults, families with children, and seniors. Approximately half of the director's time is spent on programs for K-12 students and 50% for other members of the public. Expanding the public outreach activities beyond schools should provide quality informal educational experiences, while also benefitting Sycamore's land protection mission.

The EE Program centers on Monroe County, though programming is also offered in Brown, Bartholomew, Owen, and Vanderburgh counties. Additional locations may be included as the program expands or other opportunities arise.

## Schools

Sycamore's Program will develop and maintain relationships with school districts, public schools, and individual educators. School-based programming will focus on public schools. Sycamore's preserves offer an excellent venue for hands-on environmental education. For those preserves with appropriate facilities to host outings, the director will develop a curriculum with lesson plans tailored to its natural features. The lessons will be adaptable to various grade levels and align with applicable state education standards to enhance student learning and the attractiveness of the program.

Whenever possible, students will visit the preserve for an immersive educational experience. However, if a field trip cannot be arranged, lessons may be taught successfully on school grounds. Our program emphasizes experiential outdoor education, so outdoor lessons are preferred over classroom-based activities.

The following Sycamore preserves, which possess diverse natural features and are suitable for group activities, will serve as the basis of the curriculum. This preserve-based programming will be offered to schools within the same county as the preserve, whether taught on-site or on school grounds.

- Touch the Earth Natural Area, Tangeman Woods and the Outdoor Lab Trail – Bartholomew County
- Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve – Monroe County

- Trevlac Bluffs Nature Preserve, The Laura Hare Nature Preserve at Downey Hill – Brown County
- Eagle Slough Natural Area, Columbia Mine Preserve – Vanderburgh, Pike, and Gibson Counties

Two conservation easements are also available for Environmental Education Program activities:

- Fish Creek Conservation Easement – Owen County
- Yellowwood Farm – Monroe County

Other preserves may be added to this list as appropriate.

A handful of existing activities will be grandfathered into Sycamore’s new preserve-based program, and the Director will explore opportunities to continue and expand these programs:

- Salem Community Schools Outdoor Laboratory project development (chestnut research, prairie planting, wetland restoration)
- Carbon cycle research experiences at Morgan-Monroe State Forest with Indiana University

Our services are provided to schools free of charge. Schools may be asked to contribute the costs of transportation. Sycamore may be able to provide scholarships to assist with transportation costs when needed.

Under this preserve-based curriculum model, Sycamore may participate in school field days, such as Griffy Lake Nature Days, pending availability of volunteers to act on our behalf.

Sycamore is sensitive to the time and resource constraints facing public schools and public school educators. We are committed to making our program a benefit and enhancement to educators’ work. We are committed to listening to educators regarding their needs and priorities as we develop and revise our programming.

### *Public*

Our Environmental Education Program offers interpretive hikes and activities for the public at Sycamore preserves. The director is encouraged to write “lesson plans” for these preserve-tailored programs as well so that volunteers can lead them, expanding our capacity. We will also continue to recruit personable, enthusiastic volunteer experts to develop and lead programs at our preserves.

Our public programming is designed to reach a variety of audiences through special series:

- Li'l Hikers (families with children under 6) – hands-on outings that expose very young children to the outdoors with their parents
- New program for families with kids in the upper age range of existing Li'l Hikers (6 To 12) – to be developed and named

- Strolling Science Seminars (older adults) – science walks led by professors and resource management professionals at Sycamore preserves, typically on weekdays; replaces “Weekday Walkers”
- General nature hikes (all ages) – interpretive outings led by director and volunteers on topics like trees, birds, butterflies, plants, spiders, and so forth; special emphasis on weekend offerings
- Retirement community outreach – easy weekday hikes at nearby Sycamore preserves coordinated with retirement community event planners
- Additional programming may target organized church groups with an interest in environmental stewardship

Our public education activities are free for members, with a \$5 per person or \$10 per family suggested donation for non-members.

### Goals and Measuring Success

The goals of the Environmental Education Program are:

- Provide a high-quality, enjoyable educational experience to people of all ages to help them learn about the environment and develop a greater understanding of natural processes.
- Showcase Sycamore preserves by utilizing their diverse natural features to attract people and forge lifelong connections with nature.
- Introduce Sycamore to new people through personal interaction and media coverage, raising awareness and producing new members, volunteers, and land projects.
- Promote the development of a land ethic for those engaging in Sycamore programs.

Sycamore values feedback and continual improvement. To measure and illustrate the program’s impact, the director will collect:

- Feedback through online surveys, particularly for teachers
- Stories, photos, and drawings.
- Metrics such as number of people attending each event, signing up for e-newsletter, or joining Sycamore; types of audiences reached; and number of volunteers engaged.
- All media coverage of Sycamore EE Programming.
- Sycamore will track new memberships, donations, and other projects arising as a result of its education efforts.

Opportunities may arise to collaborate with University faculty to evaluate program impact among participants.

The EE Director will work closely with the Communications Director and the Development Director to maximize synergies.

Sycamore also expects most of its lessons, particularly those tied to schools, to meet state educational standards. Sycamore will demonstrate in advance which standards are met by each lesson, allowing more informed choices and participation by educators.

Opportunities for partnership and collaboration with other environmental education group and professionals will arise. Sycamore expects to participate in these opportunities when they can benefit the program and the organization. One example of a potentially beneficial opportunity is the work being done by the Cope Environmental Center in Centerville, Indiana.

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