

# Rangelands in the Classroom: Increasing Rangeland Understanding of Students and Teachers

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Rangeland professionals are passionate about rangelands, and they want people in their communities to know what rangelands are and the many resources rangelands offer. Teachers are equally passionate about helping their students become good citizens who will make productive contributions to the world in which they live. For many teachers, this endeavor includes helping their students understand the landscapes that surround them. There are many opportunities for those who care about rangelands to partner with educators to help students gain appreciation, understanding, and fascination with the wild open spaces we know as rangelands.

Many educators and rangeland professionals have a strong common interest in helping children and adults learn about the landscapes on which they live, work, and play. However, efforts to address this common interest are becoming increasingly difficult as our population becomes more and more urbanized and electronic. The decreased daily interactions between children and the wild and natural landscapes that surround them has given rise to a modern concern over a “nature deficit disorder,” highlighted by writer Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods*.<sup>1</sup> Youth education programs focused on rangelands offer a possible way to address this common interest and concern.

In this article, we will acknowledge challenges and outline opportunities to increase exposure of students to rangeland topics while they are in elementary school, middle school, and high school. We hope that successes in this endeavor will increase the rangeland literacy of tomorrow’s citizens and increase their daily interactions with, and appreciation for, rangelands.

## Why Range Professionals Want Rangeland Education for Students

Rangeland management embraces the care and stewardship of land to meet the needs of society. There may have been a time, decades ago, when meeting “the needs of society” was relatively simple and largely focused on working with ranchers to produce meat, wool, and leather. The modern era of

rangeland management, however, requires an ability to manage land for a much wider variety of ecological services for a more diverse set of societal needs and desires.

In this modern era, rangeland professionals need an informed citizenry to give guidance and provide support for proposed actions. Most range professionals wish for a greater understanding of rangelands among those who graze and recreate on rangelands, read the news, and vote. Sometimes this hope reflects a pragmatic desire for people to understand their own impacts on the land and have appreciation for the stewardship efforts of those who manage rangelands. Other times, desires to increase understanding of rangelands are aimed simply at sharing a profound love for rangelands that seem “hidden in plain sight” to most people. Regardless of the motives, increasing understanding of rangelands would enhance the conservation and management of rangelands. This goal inevitably leads to the desire to increase the coverage of rangeland topics in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) textbooks, classroom activities, and field events.

## Many Teachers Want Their Students to Understand the Landscapes in Which They Live

We see a growing concern about the divide between schools and the communities and environments that surround them, which has given rise to an educational paradigm called “place-based education.” Today, children often seem disconnected from the world outside their doors and are more connected to electronic gadgets, computer interfaces, and video-based experiences. Place-based education seeks to teach language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum in ways that incorporate unique aspects of the local community and environment. When applied to studies of the schoolyard or surrounding areas, it helps dispel many students’ misperceptions that “nature” can only be found far away from human activities and that humans are not part of the ecosystem.

Place-based education is a powerful idea on which to build rangeland education programs because most people live in or near rangeland landscapes or agricultural areas that were once