



Project Learning Tree Strategic Plan Summary for AFF Trustees

2012 – 2015

We grow stewardship student by student

Organization Context

Our nation has a growing reliance on the benefits private forests provide. Yet as we ramp up our efforts to protect family forests today, it will not mean much if we lose them tomorrow – which is why the growing disconnect between children and nature is a grave threat to America’s natural heritage.

The Case for Environmental Education

Today, children are spending half as much time outdoors as they did 20 years ago. We are at risk of losing an entire generation’s appreciation for how nature works and what it needs to remain healthy and productive, even as we face enormous environmental challenges that will impact the quality of their lives.

The American Forest Foundation’s (AFF) work is about the future. What type of country will we be 20, 50, 100 years from now? Will our citizens understand the natural world and feel connected to it? Will they know the benefits the environment provides and their responsibility for it? Will they have the skills required to address complex environmental challenges? Will the next generation be prepared for the future they will inherit? Will youth today be stewards of our forests tomorrow?

To support its fundamental long-term goals, one of AFF’s strategic priorities is to ensure decision-makers and educators understand and value America’s woodlands. Through Project Learning Tree® (PLT), the environmental education program of AFF, we are developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and effective decision-making skills the next generation needs to protect our forests and natural resources.

PLT uses trees and forests as windows on the world to inspire a lifetime of environmental stewardship. Since it began in 1976, PLT has been widely recognized as the cornerstone for environmental education and is one of the most widely used environmental education programs in the U.S. and abroad.

PLT’s aspiration is to reach every child in America through environmental education that uses the forest as a lens. We want Americans to be environmentally literate and responsible citizens who appreciate our forests and the benefits they provide, and take action to conserve them. We want every child to be exposed to Project Learning Tree, whether that’s through our nation’s schools and universities, nature centers and museums, youth and community groups, parent teacher associations, or at home. We aim to achieve this by:

- developing innovative, high-quality environmental education curriculum materials and resources
- nurturing active and diverse learning communities by providing professional development that reflects current research and models best practices
- optimizing the capacity and sustainability of Project Learning Tree to deliver its programs.

Achieving these goals will result in a market-driven and service-oriented program with innovative tools for educators using the latest technology delivered through web-based training. Our state programs will be generating new revenue and will be poised to develop deeper relationships with schools, teachers, and students.

Introduction to PLT's Strategic Plan

Project Learning Tree developed this Strategic Plan in order to provide a four-year roadmap that will enable PLT to remain the cornerstone for high quality Environmental Education. The plan was developed with broad involvement and guidance from the PLT Education Operating Committee, staff, network of PLT State Partners, and other key stakeholders. The planning process enabled PLT to assess the challenges and opportunities we are likely to face over the next four years to determine the best goals and objectives for taking full advantage of the opportunities while successfully navigating the challenges.

PLT will provide teachers with the training, inspiration, knowledge, skills, resources, and mentoring to develop or modify their own individualized curriculum with effective and engaging place-based learning opportunities using their school grounds, nearby public lands, and forested landscapes as their classrooms. Environmental stewardship will be increased first through an appreciation and study of trees and the forest as a whole—its ecology, as well as the role of trees and forests in the community's culture and economics. This in turn builds a stronger sense of place and creates future forestland stewards.

PLT Vision Statement

PLT is committed to creating a future where the next generation values the natural world and has the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions and take responsible actions to sustain forests and the broader environment.

PLT Mission Statement

PLT advances environmental literacy and promotes stewardship through excellence in environmental education, professional development, and curriculum resources that use trees and forests as windows on the world.

Background/History

As the education arm of the American Forest Foundation, PLT uses forests and trees as windows on the world to increase students' understanding of our environment; stimulate students' critical and creative thinking; develop students' abilities to make informed decisions on environmental issues; and instill in students the commitment to take responsible action on behalf of the environment. Through this work, PLT helps AFF achieve its mission of increasing public awareness and understanding of the role that forests and the environment play in our lives, building the skills and commitment needed to conserve and sustain forests and the environment, and developing and advancing programs that support conservation and environmental education.

Started in 1976, Project Learning Tree has been the cornerstone for Environmental Education (EE) and is one of the most widely used EE programs in the United States and abroad. PLT continues to set the standard for excellence in EE, and a number of other successful national providers in the field (Project WILD and Project WET, to name just two) have closely patterned their educational resources, training models, and program delivery systems on the models that PLT originally pioneered.

The PLT Program encompasses three essential cross-supporting elements:

1) High Quality Curriculum Materials - PLT's materials are peer-reviewed, award winning, and meet state and national education standards. The curriculum materials provide the tools educators need to bring the environment into the classroom and their students into the environment. Because of the rigor with which PLT develops its curriculum materials and their correlation to state academic standards they are highly valued and used by teachers across the US with their students.

2) Professional Development Delivery Model - More than 500,000 educators have participated in PLT's Professional Development programs (required to get materials), where they gain a keen understanding of how to use the PLT materials, resulting in classroom application. Through this professional development, the PLT Program has reached over 75 million students in the United States and abroad.

3) Implementation via State Partnership Network - PLT implements Professional Development at the state and local levels through a network of over 80 PLT State Coordinators who work for PLT State Sponsoring Organizations. State Coordinators align the materials with local standards and work with a grassroots network of workshop facilitators to train over 30,000 educators annually in PLT. By leveraging the capacity of its respective state networks, PLT reaches and teaches many more educators than it ever could on its own – and in ways that meet local needs.

PLT's current approach to interacting with those it serves can be summarized as:

National PLT → State Network Professionals → Formal and Nonformal Educators → Future Decision Makers

Over the next four years, PLT's primary means of delivering materials and training will continue to follow the approach described above, while adapting to changing education, economic, and technological trends.

Trends in Education Reform

Environmental literacy involves the development of complex understandings and sophisticated skills that allows individuals to solve environmental problems. Much of this learning takes place in schools; therefore, PLT must be concerned with working effectively within the current climate of education reform in the United States. Over two-thirds of current PLT workshop participants are in formal education.

The world of education is constantly changing in demographics and pedagogy. Materials that do not reflect the latest teaching strategies, are not connected to the most recent standards and evaluation tools, are not accurate and user-friendly, and do not reflect changing demographics, fail to get used by educators. Recent research would indicate that PLT's "three-legged stool" of curricula, professional development, and network localization, is sound but that elements of it must change to continue our success.

Trends over the past decade include increased emphasis on standards-based curriculum and assessment and more attention to the factors that influence student achievement¹.

In addition to the research on current professional development content and length, there is an enormous and ongoing shift in the development of online training opportunities for teachers. Although no solid data are available on how many teachers receive staff training either partly or exclusively online, the professional development marketplace has undergone an explosion in offerings in recent years. Researchers and practitioners agree that successful models of online professional development use technology to build on—and enhance—what has been learned in face-to-face staff development. A key research point is that sustained engagement in content with peers can spur changes in teacher practice². This is another area for PLT to develop as we presently do little online.

The Forest Context

In 1911, during the debate surrounding the Weeks Act, which established National Forests in the eastern part of the United States, the young scientist Raphael Zon made a simple observation, “A national policy which, though considering the direct value of forests as a source of timber, fails to take full account also of their influence upon erosion, the flow of streams, and climate, may easily endanger the well-being of the whole people.”³ The depth of that statement has never been fully understood. While 1.6 billion people around the world depend directly on forests for their livelihood⁴, the benefits derived from the ecological functions of forests such as, hydrologic and nutrient cycling, energy transfer, carbon sequestration and species richness continue to be extremely undervalued.

Since about the 1920’s forest cover within the United States has remained relatively constant at just over 300 million hectares⁵. While there is considerable variation at the regional and local levels, losses to development have generally been compensated for by the abandonment and subsequent reforestation of marginal and small lot farmlands. However, annual consumption of timber exceeds annual net growth by about 13%. Forest stability within the United States has been achieved through imports of timber and timber products. There truly is a world forest.

In 1987 the United Nations Bruntland Report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁶. As a forest-dependent species, our stewardship of the forest resource provides the framework in which sustainability becomes a practice rather than a concept. Forests are the lens through which we will determine, as Raphael Zon said “the well-being of the whole people.”

¹ The modern focus on a standards-based curriculum and assessments can be traced to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 that raised the alarm, pointing to an achievement gap between U.S. students and their peers in competing countries. This led to the passage of Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), followed by the passage of No Child Left Behind (2001).

² Sawchuk, Stephen (2009). The Online Option. *Edweek*. Vol. 3, Issue 1, Page 15-17.

³ Barten, P.K., 2006 and 2007, *New England Forests*

⁴ http://www.un.org/esa/forests/pdf/session_documents/unff9/Fact_Sheet_ForestsandPeople.pdf

⁵ <http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/slides/major-trends.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>

Partner Budget Trends

The PLT network is comprised primarily of participants from public agencies, non-profit organizations, trade associations, and universities. The economic recession decimated state revenues, resulting in cumulative deficits of more than \$500 billion since 2008 and dramatic spending cuts to close the gaps, as all but one of the 50 states must balance their budget annually⁷. These spending cuts have negatively impacted state programs and staffing as well as non-profit organizations that receive funding through state agencies.

While state finances are beginning to stabilize and the recession appears to be at an end, the economy has not yet returned to its previous vigor and levels of revenue for state agencies.

We see similar trends of economic weakness and industry consolidation in the forest products industry, a key financial supporter of PLT network participants. In sum, we have an increasingly fragile network due to limits on financial resources.

Our Approach/Rationale

The following goals and objectives for PLT over the next four years are our response to the important issues identified in the strategic planning process and current trends. These goals provide a roadmap for fulfilling the strategic direction. Successful implementation of the Plan will allow PLT to arrive at its 40th anniversary with each part functioning at a high level.

Over the next four years, PLT's distinctive network and delivery system will continue to be our primary means of training, distributing materials, and ensuring local relevance. However, current educational trends and access to technology offer PLT new opportunities to reach more educators more effectively and efficiently. We also must be more adaptive to address constantly changing demographics and pedagogy, and to ensure that our resources achieve both PLT's and AFF's missions, while having optimal impact on educators and students.

The following Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, and Metrics will enable PLT to reach greater numbers of educators and students with deeper levels of engagement, resulting in an increased use of PLT materials in the classroom as well as increased policy and financial support for PLT state partners and AFF. Providing high-quality, up-to-date curriculum and resources, being a provider of choice for educator Professional Development, and building the sustainability of the PLT network through the development of new revenue generating sources will ensure our success. As part of this work, all PLT materials will reinforce the forest lens and use the latest technology for delivery and use by teachers and students, which includes making all PLT professional development available through web-based tools. We will also take the PLT GreenSchools! program to a national scale, thereby increasing engagement by schools, teachers, and students nationwide.

⁷ Bullock, Nicole. US state finances begin to stabilize. Financial Times. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d575a86a-1ba3-11e1-8647-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1h5DbtiRJ>

PLT Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, and Metrics

GOAL 1: Develop innovative, high-quality environmental education curriculum materials and resources.

PLT curriculum materials are updated based on extensive evaluation, teacher feedback, and the need to meet changing education criteria. However, our core materials and resources had their last major overhaul 18 years ago, with subsequent significant improvements in 2004. In order to remain relevant for implementation by teachers in the classroom, PLT materials **must** reflect the latest teaching strategies, be connected to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects and the most recent core standards and evaluation tools, and be accurate and useable. The topics and pedagogy presented in PLT's curricula need to reflect a forest lens and the latest environmental and educational research and data. Environmental knowledge and education priorities change so rapidly that regular and planned revisions and updates to existing materials, as well as the development of new materials, are essential in meeting the needs of the 21st Century educator.

Objective 1: Assess and evaluate existing materials and resources for relevance, inclusiveness, and effectiveness.

Outcome: PLT materials and resources remain relevant, inclusive, and effective.

Metric: At least 75% of survey respondents report on workshop participant survey forms that PLT materials are relevant to meeting their needs.

Metric: Demographic data reported on workshop participant survey forms reflects inclusiveness of all audiences and meets the recommendations of the PLT Diversity Task Force.

Metric: All PLT materials meet their educational objectives as determined through formative and summative evaluations.

Objective 2: Develop and test revenue generating models for materials and resources.

Outcome: PLT generates revenue in exchange for providing relevant, inclusive, and effective PLT materials and resources.

Metric: By 2014, at least 5 state programs implement and assess new revenue generating models.

Metric: By 2016, at least 33% of state programs implement PLT's new revenue generating models.

Metric: By 2016, PLT generates at least \$200,000 (net) in additional revenue annually.

Objective 3: Develop and continuously improve innovative and high quality materials and resources.

Outcome: PLT is regarded as a leader in the environmental education arena for its innovative and high quality materials and resources.

Metric: The number of PLT state programs with signed MOU's remains stable at 45, or increases, and the number of sponsoring organizations remains stable at 75 organizations, or increases

Metric: At least 5 national organizations maintain partnerships with National PLT to advance their missions.

Metric: At least 67% of national and state PLT staff are engaged in state and national environmental education efforts and collaborate with other EE leaders, such as NAAEE and its affiliates, state and federal education departments, state and federal natural resource agencies, and others.

Objective 4: Develop strategies to increase awareness of and demand for materials and resources.

Outcome: Awareness of and demand for PLT materials and resources increase.

Metric: By 2016, PLT reaches at least 33,000 educators per year (10% above the 2011 baseline) and enrolls at least 2,000 schools as GreenSchools! (100% above 2011 baseline).

Metric: By 2016, PLT reaches at least 180,000 website visitors per year (67% above 2011 baseline), reaches at least 40,000 subscribers through the Branch newsletter (335% above 2012 baseline), attains a 33% or greater "open rate" for Branch newsletter readers (200% above 2011 baseline), and attains at least 6,000 Facebook "likes" (300% above 2011 baseline).

GOAL 2: Nurture active and diverse learning communities by providing professional development that reflects current research and models best practices.

The professional development model used by PLT for more than 35 years has been to deliver materials through educator workshops provided by local facilitators at the community level. Competition among professional development providers is fierce, with attractive models needed to remain innovative, inclusive, and cutting edge to be a professional development provider of choice. The current climate of accountability and shifts in the use of online technology for providing professional development presents opportunities and challenges, emphasizing the importance of reviewing PLT's overall professional development approach across its network of Educators, Facilitators, and PLT State Coordinators. PLT's professional development must evolve along with our materials to attract educators and keep them returning for continued PLT professional development and resource offerings.

Objective 1: Identify and define the key segments of the PLT learning community and desired competencies of each.

Outcome: PLT audiences are clearly articulated and appropriate methods to deepen the engagement are identified.

Metric: By 2016, PLT's professional development models are modified and tested to ensure they address desired competencies and deepen the engagement of our learning communities.

Objective 2: Research, design, and implement professional development models that address desired competencies, operational cultures, and achievement celebrations, for each learning community segment.

Outcome: PLT will have targeted professional development approaches and best practices to meet the needs of each learning community segment.

Metric: By 2014, at least 5 states pilot test PLT's new and modified professional development models, to ensure they address desired competencies and deepen the engagement of our learning communities.

Metric: By 2016, at least 50% of states implement PLT's new and modified professional development models.

Objective 3: Assess and continuously improve professional development to enhance PLT learning community segments.

Outcome: All PLT learning communities will have appropriate professional development.

Metric: By 2016, PLT's new and modified professional development models are continuously assessed through workshop participant survey forms and state-based evaluations of participant use.

Metric: By 2016, state programs who are evaluating their programs use test bank questions and other evaluation guidance provided by National PLT.

Objective 4: Develop a funding and revenue-generating strategy for PLT's professional development.

Outcome: PLT programs, including *GreenSchools!*, generate revenue.

Metric: By 2014, at least 5 state programs implement and assess new revenue generating models.

Metric: By 2016, at least 33% of state programs implement PLT's new revenue generating models.

Metric: By 2016, PLT generate at least \$200,000 (net) in additional

revenue annually.

Objective 5: Develop strategies to increase awareness of and demand for PLT's professional development.

Outcome: Awareness and demand for PLT professional development increases.

Metric: By 2016, PLT reaches at least 33,000 educators per year (10% above the 2011 baseline) and enrolls at least 2,000 schools as GreenSchools! (100% above 2011 baseline).

Metric: By 2016, PLT reaches at least 180,000 website visitors per year (67% above 2011 baseline), reaches at least 40,000 subscribers through the Branch newsletter (335% above 2012 baseline), attains a 33% or greater "open rate" for Branch newsletter readers (200% above 2011 baseline), and attains at least 6,000 Facebook "likes" (300% above 2011 baseline).

GOAL 3: Optimize the capacity and sustainability of Project Learning Tree to deliver its programs.

The PLT Network is made up of various organizations including state agencies, non-profits, universities, etc. This network has been functioning for the last 35 years and AFF has worked to continue and grow the network through various initiatives that have maintained and grown network capacity. Due to the current economic climate and recent recession, these PLT State Sponsoring organizations are under enormous stress, as almost 100% of PLT State Programs receive support in some way through federal and/or state agencies. As these budgets have been cut, education is often one of the first program elements to be eliminated. Organizations often also change strategic focus during times of economic stress in ways that can reduce or eliminate support for education programs. PLT State Coordinators often have multiple responsibilities in other areas. When staff members responsible for PLT leave or retire from these organizations, their positions cannot always be filled in the same way.

In addition, PLT's national staff has been relatively stable over the last five years, with a turnover of two positions and a total of six staff. The PLT program has seen programs expand and grow in complexity over the past decade, without a corresponding increase in staff size. In 2001, PLT produced the PreK-8 Environmental Education Activity Guide and four secondary modules. In 2011, we produce the PreK-8 Environmental Activity Guide, seven secondary modules (two online), the Early Childhood Experiences Guide, the *GreenSchools!* Investigations, and the Energy & Society Kit – with the same number of staff. Given the small staff size, individuals serve very diverse roles, and have been challenged to keep pace with the growth of the program. Increases in staff time, through direct hiring of additional staff, reallocation of staff duties, or through strategic use of consultants and contracted workers, will likely be required in order to give the PLT program the capacity it needs to thrive.

Objective 1: Cultivate diversity, inclusiveness, and accessibility of PLT at every level to support the growth and resiliency of the PLT network.

Outcome: National and state PLT programs implement new policies and recommendations from PLT's Diversity Task Force.

Metric: By 2016, National PLT and 33% of state programs implement diversity policies and recommendations.

Objective 2: Provide materials, resources, and professional development to ensure highly qualified staff and volunteers at the state, national, and international levels.

Outcome: Staff and volunteers possess the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to carry-out PLT's mission.

Metric: National staff completes annual self-evaluations and supervisor evaluations, which identify strengths and areas needing improvement.

Metric: By 2016, at least 75% of state program staff and volunteers indicate growth in their knowledge and skills based on professional development provided through state or national PLT.

Metric: By 2016, at least 85% of states assess their programs through the Best Management Practices Self-Assessment Tool and identify strengths and areas needing improvement.

Objective 3: Establish best management practices and continually improve the tools to assess state and national program capacity and areas of improvement.

Outcome: State and national programs regularly assess their capacity and determine areas for improvement and/or opportunities to build capacity through new partnerships.

Metric: By 2016, the Education Operating Committee and National staff assess PLT's capacity through a proven assessment tool and improve capacity based on the results.

Metric: By 2016, at least 85% of states assess their programs through the Best Management Practices Self-Assessment Tool and improve their capacity based on the results.

Objective 4: Build the financial stability and resilience of the PLT network.

Outcome: PLT network meets its budget and funding goals and is resilient to change.

Metric: By 2016, at least 40 state programs report adequate budgets to meet their needs on the state annual report form.

Metric: By 2016, at least 85% of states assess their programs through the Best Management Practices Self-Assessment Tool and improve their capacity based on the results.

Objective 5: Allocate human resources to ensure a highly effective PLT network.

Outcome: Annual goals and objectives of the strategic plan are implemented and met.

Metric: National PLT reports on progress toward implementing its annual work plans and the strategic plan goals to EOC and AFF Board of Trustees.

Metric: By 2016, at least 40 state programs report use of annual work plans and strategic plans on the state annual report form.

Metric: By 2016, at least 85% of states assess their programs through the Best Management Practices Self-Assessment Tool and use the results to develop their strategic plans.

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