

# Sunday School Lessons: God's Earth, Our Home

New Community Project

*Peace through Justice•Care for the Earth•Experiential Learning*

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[NCP “philosophy” in italics]

## Introduction

Each of these lessons will be more effective in an outdoor setting if that is possible, given the number of students, teachers, weather, outside space, etc.

For any activity that requires paper, if possible use one-side clean paper (paper that has been used on one side). Also provide washable cups for drinking, if cups are needed.

Explain why we need to reduce the amount of paper we use. (Could include: the average person in the US uses about 760 pounds of paper per year—requiring about three trees; every pound of paper requires 3.5 pounds of wood to produce and creates 3 pounds of carbon dioxide, a principle global warming gas; paper production is also one of the worst causes of water and air pollution. While paper is not the only use for the world's trees, half the forests that once covered the earth are now gone. What benefit are forests? To humans? To other creatures?

*[NCP feels it important not only to promote good earth stewardship practices, but to talk about why these are important. “What” can educate; “why” can motivate. Offering reusable cups then becomes an opportunity for education and motivation.]*

Included resources (at end): \* Simplified scripture reading based on Genesis 1:1-2:3  
\* Lifestyle Survey \* Four Environmental Problems (Air, Animals, Land, Water) Lots of other resources on the Care for Creation page of the NPC website.

## Lower to Middle Elementary

1. Gathering Song – “Way Up In The Sky”. Ask students, who made the birds way up in the sky? Ask, what else did God make? Explain that the group will be talking about the world that God has made and how they can take care of God’s creation.

### *Way Up In The Sky*

*Way up in the sky, the little birds fly, while down in the nest, the little birds rest. With a wing on the left, and a wing on the right, the little birds rest all through the night.*

*Shhh, they’re sleeping!*

*(Loudly) The bright sun comes up, the dew falls away,  
Good morning, good morning, the little birds say!*

2. Bible Study – If students can read, distribute copies of Scripture Reading based on Genesis 1:1-2:3. Have children help read it aloud, or teachers can read parts and cue the group to say the response “And God said, ‘It’s Good.’”

3. God Made – On a chalk board or dry erase, draw a globe and continents. Ask the students to call out names of things in the world that God created that help make the planet such a wonderful, livable place. As you hear responses, quickly draw in the animal, plant or other feature.

4. Activity – Give each child a small ball of clay or play dough. Ask each person to make a model of something God created. With the whole group sitting in a circle, ask each child to tell about their creation. Then ask the following questions: How does it feel to create something? How would you like other people to treat your creation?

5. Respond – Read Psalm 24:1a, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” Ask, To whom does the earth belong? How do you think God wants us to treat the creation? Read to the group the action items listed on the Lifestyle Survey and ask as you go along why each one is important. Ask them what other things we can do to care for God’s world. Give each student a copy of the Lifestyle Survey (copied on blank side of used paper). Ask them to take it home and ask their parents to help fill it out. (Tell students it is copied onto used paper to save trees!) Tell children to post the Lifestyle Survey on their refrigerator or other visible location in the house to remind them how to care for God’s earth.

6. Closing Prayer – Read to children: O God, Creator of the Universe, you have made all things and called them “good.” We thank you for the beautiful earth that we call home. Yet people have damaged your good works. You have asked us to tend your garden. Yet we have trampled the flowers, chopped down the trees, and dirtied the water and air. We are sorry, and we want to make peace with your world. Teach us how to take care of your creation. Amen.

## Middle to Upper Elementary

1. Gathering – Take children outside (natural area if possible) and ask them to stand or sit a semi-circle, if possible facing a natural area. Read the Scripture Reading based on Genesis 1:1-2:3. After the reading the account of the first day, ask children to call out things that remind them of what God created on the first day. Repeat the process for each day of creation, encouraging children to be creative in their answers. Then, read Genesis 2:15, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it.” Ask children, what is our responsibility toward creation?
2. Activity – Give each child a small ball of clay or play dough. Ask each person to make a model of something God created. With the whole group sitting in a circle, ask each child to tell about their creation. Then ask the following questions: How does it feel to create something? How would you like other people to treat your creation?
3. Think – Tell the children that God’s world is suffering because people have not treated God’s creation with respect. We are selfish and wasteful with the goodness of the earth. If feasible, draw the earth on a blackboard or dry erase. *[at NCP, we often draw the earth “upside down,” and ask if there is a sign on planet earth from outer space that says “this side up”—it’s a moment to educate about who draws the maps and what it feels like to be on the top or bottom.]* Ask the children to think about the creature they created—what are some things we do to the earth that might harm this creature? Quickly draw in these harmful practices as they are mentioned.  
  
There are things we can do to help repair the damage and heal the earth! Divide the children into four groups. Assign each group one of the Environmental Problems on the handout (make copies on one-side-used paper; tell the children it is copied onto used paper to save trees). Have the groups read the information, then come up with one or more ways they can help solve the problem described. Have the whole group come together, and ask each small group to report on the problem they studied and tell what solutions they discussed. When each small group is finished reporting, ask the other participants whether they can think of any additional solutions to the problem.
4. Respond – Read to the group the action items listed on the Lifestyle Survey and let students respond or comment. Ask them what other things we can do to care for God’s world. Give each student a copy of the Lifestyle Survey (copied on blank side of used paper). Ask them to fill out the survey. Together discuss what other things their family might do to care for God’s world. Suggest they post the Lifestyle Survey on their refrigerator or other visible location in the house.
5. Closing Prayer – “O God, Creator of the Universe, you have made all things and called them good. We thank you for the beautiful earth that we call home. Yet people have damaged your good works. We have trampled the flowers, cut the trees, and dirtied the water and air. We are sorry, and we want to make peace with your world. Teach us how to take care of your creation. Amen.”

## Junior/Senior High

1. Begin the session by telling a funny or embarrassing personal story about an effort to care for the environment, or in some other way introduce the topic of the troubles facing the earth and the challenge of dealing with them. (In a pinch, here's a story told by NCP director David Radcliff titled "Peek and ye shall find...")

*"You won't believe what I found today. I was at Door 1A of the United terminal at O'Hare waiting for my son Daniel to pick me up after a trip east. As I waited, I was engaging in my usual post-flight ritual—fishing for recyclables in the curbside trash cans. I do this other places, but feel a special compunction when returning from a trip. I don't own a car (I traded it for a bicycle), and while flying somewhere is better than driving a car by oneself, planes emit gases at a higher altitude, and thus have a more insidious effect on the global climate. So I'm scurrying to compensate a bit by capturing some recyclable energy about to be lost as trash.*

*In the third can, there was a bag. In the bag was a trove of items—a seeming emergency stash grabbed at a store on the way to the airport by someone in a hurry. I first fished out the typical water bottle—and an aluminum can. Then as I pushed aside open cottage cheese and chunked fruit containers, I noticed other wrapped items. First there was a 12-pack of disposable "sensitive skin" razors—10 were still inside! (I've recently felt forced to switch to disposables, as the regular ones not only have way too many blades, but cost way too much.) And in my hand was about a year's worth—recycled!—and tailor-made for a sensitive guy like me...*

*And there just below that...a container I didn't recognize...but on closer examination was shown to contain...Veggie Patch Meatless Meatballs! Still in a sealed package, a month left on the expiration date, the morning temperature a chilly 34 degrees—assuring that they were still good. As we don't eat beef in our house, my mind quickly turned to sweet and sour meatballs—a dish we hadn't had in years. My find even got Daniel excited (he's typically less-than-enthused over such "discoveries").*

*The Lord (or at least a harried wasteful fellow traveler) doth provide.*

*They say we waste about half the food we produce in this society. And over a quarter of that waste takes place after we get the food items in our hands (as opposed to during harvesting, packaging, shipping and storing). Along with the wasted food comes the wasted energy: Our food system consumes 17% of all the fossil fuel we use in the US. So imagine 8.5% of our fossil fuel burned for nothing. And think of all the pollutants we send into our skies and waterways raising this food—that's wasted too, adding insult to injury for God's earth.)"*

2. Ask someone to read Psalm 104. Initiate discussion: Why do you think God made the world? Why did God make humankind? What role do you think God had in mind for the humans in relation to the rest of creation? Read Genesis 2:15, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it." List some "tilling" activities. What grade would God give us as tillers? Have we been good at that? Now ask them to list some "keeping" activities. How have we done at that? What grade?

3. Do a little match game with the group. Write these numbers on the board: 3

trillion; 50 billion; 130 million; 40 million; 50 Then read off these phrases randomly, asking the group to match them up with the correct numbers: 1) number of cell phones discarded in our country per year (130 million) 2) percentage of food produced in the US that is wasted (50—and since food production, packaging, storage and transport is responsible for 17 percent of our fossil fuel use, this is also a huge waste of energy) 3) total miles driven in the US per year (3 trillion—as much as the rest of the world combined—and on average, every mile we drive creates a pound of CO<sub>2</sub>) 4) number of aluminum cans pitched each year (50 billion—enough to rebuild the US airline fleet 4 times) 5) number of water bottles tossed every day in USA (40 million—end-to-end, from the Washington Monument to the Grand Canyon—and back. Each 12 oz. bottle requires 6 oz. of oil to make it.) So we are behind a lot of the waste and pollution of our planet.

(If there is time, have the group do the youth version of NCP's Ecological Footprint activity. Can be downloaded from the website or requested from NCP) *[NCP works to not only highlight the problems facing our world, but our role as part of the problem as well as part of the solution. We need to take responsibility for our actions, out of fairness to the earth, to our neighbors and to the future.]*

If God had it to do over, do you think God would do it any differently? What could God do to ensure humans would better care for the earth—anything?

4. Assemble students in a circle. Give one teen a small pitcher of water and one cup per person (if possible, don't use throw-away cups!). Ask the student with the pitcher to pour him or herself a cup of water. Have them pass the pitcher around, allowing others to pour themselves cups of water. Pass the water around until it's all gone from the pitcher. Then ask how much water each person in the group received. How did you decide how much water to pour for yourself? Did you feel responsible for making sure everyone got water? Why or why not? What are some things you could do that are the *opposite* of stewardship? Creation stewardship starts with an awareness of how our choices affect the earth and other people.

Can a person have too many possessions? What is too many? Why? Remind students it would require four more earths like this one to sustain the US standard of living for all 6.5 billion inhabitants of the earth! Give each person a copy of NCP's "Spending Money" or "Consuming Appetites," resource sheets to read later at home. (Option: read and discuss now if you have time.) Pass out or post a copy of NCP's Learning Tours—a great way for youth or adults to see how our neighbors are living and the creation is faring—in the Arctic, Amazon, Central America, Africa and Asia!

5. Respond – If they didn't do it already, give each person a copy of Ecological Footprint to take home and fill out. Talk about one way the class can help the church be better stewards of the earth. Are there recycling bins? Does the church purchase recycled paper for copiers? Are disposable products used in the church kitchen (see "Styrofoam v. glass" on the NCP website)? How about replacing all lightbulbs in with compact fluorescent bulbs? Do you have an inspiring story of a younger person who did something extraordinary in caring for the earth? That would be a great way to close.

## Four Environmental Problems (Middle to Upper Elementary)

### AIR

Did you know that one gallon of gasoline makes twenty pounds of carbon dioxide when it is burned? We burn gasoline and other petroleum products when we drive cars, mow our lawns, heat or air condition our houses, or run our factories. Where does all that carbon dioxide go? It goes straight up into the air where it collects in the atmosphere. Some carbon dioxide is needed in the atmosphere to trap the heat from the sun to create a nice, warm environment for life on earth. But what happens when too much collects there? As a result, the earth's climate is changing, causing dangers to water supplies, food production, plant and animal life, and human life. Ask the group to talk about what is happening to the polar bears in the Arctic. (As the ice melts, polar bears are sometimes drowning as they swim from one ice flow to another, as now these are further apart. Polar bears aren't as fat now as they used to be when they start to hibernate. Why is this a problem? Polar bear cubs used to have a 65% survival rate—now it's 43%.)

**How can we cut down on the amount of carbon dioxide that is produced by using less gasoline, natural gas, and fuel oil?**

### ANIMALS

God made so many different kinds of living things that we haven't yet found or named them all (in fact, of perhaps 10 million species of plants and animals, we've only discovered and named about 1.5 million). Wild animals live everywhere, not just in some far away forest. Whenever a new house or mall or movie theater or playground is built, it takes up the space where some animals had made their home. Sometimes the building pushes out the plants that provided the food for animals. Some kinds of animals cannot find new homes or enough food to eat. When that happens, the animals will die. There are many entire groups of animals and plants that can no longer find the space, food, and water they need to survive. Global Warming is also endangering many of the world's species of plants and animals. **How can we protect animals and plants that are in danger of extinction?**

### LAND

In the United States each person produces about four pounds of garbage each day. No other country can match us in garbage production. (A guessing game: how many water bottles do we throw away in the US every day: 40,000, 40 million, 40 gazillion? Laid end-to-end, these bottles would reach from the Washington Monument to the Grand Canyon—and back!) Where does all our garbage go? Most of it is buried under the ground. Some of the garbage that is buried in the earth poisons the ground and the water. Many neighborhoods in this country are running out of places to dump and want to send their garbage to other neighborhoods or even to other countries. The

only problem is that nobody wants our garbage. Unfortunately, much of the garbage ends up in the neighborhoods of poor people. There are ways of cutting down on the amount of garbage we make by buying fewer things in the first place, by reusing things we do buy, and by recycling more, but many people don't want to take the extra trouble.

**Are there some things in most people's garbage that could be used again or given away? Give examples of ways to reduce what we buy, reuse what we buy, and recycle what we buy. Does your church have recycling bins? Does it purchase paper made of recycled paper? Does it use disposable plates and cups in the church kitchen? (see "Glass v. Styrofoam" on the NCP website for more info)**

## **WATER**

Water is free – right? Well, that's been our attitude for so long that we think nothing of taking long showers, watering our lawns, washing our cars, filling our swimming pools. But in many parts of the world, and even in our own country, clean water is becoming scarce and expensive. Imagine not having enough water to drink, or having to worry about deadly diseases in your water supply. Those are problems many people face. (Half the schools in southern Sudan don't have any water at their school, so children have to bring water from home. Sometimes children miss school because they don't have a container to bring water to school.) Our rivers and lakes are being polluted by garbage and by poisonous chemicals that are being dumped into them. Americans use 1800 gallons of water each day per person; only 65 gallons or so is used around the house—the rest comes from the food we eat (600 gallons or so to grow or raise it, or raise the feed to feed it—a quarterpounder can require 500 gallons of water to raise the grain to feed the cow to create the hamburger!), water used to run power plants to provide electricity (900 gallons), and other industrial uses. **What can you do to reduce the amount of water that is used in your house?**

## **Lifestyle Survey**

Take an inventory of your lifestyle and find ways that you can make a difference for God's world! Check the appropriate column for each item below. Work toward all checks in the "We already do this" column!

We already do this	We will try harder	
		1. Recycle newspaper
		2. Turn off faucet water while brushing teeth, showering, washing dishes, etc.
		3. Take short showers, 5 minutes or less
		4. Use rechargeable batteries
		5. Use a compost pile for food scraps, yard clippings, etc.
		6. Ride a bike or walk instead of using a car (consider one car-free day each week!)
		7. Car pool to school or work
		8. Put litter in its proper place.
		9. Recycle aluminum, cans, glass, and plastic
		10. Avoid pesticides (insect sprays) in home and garden
		11. Use public transportation instead of driving your car
		12. Turn the thermostat down in the winter and up in the summer
		13. Turn off lights when not needed
		14. Hang clothes out to dry rather than using the electric or gas dryer
		15. Plant a garden or buy locally-grown organic food
		16. Use the blank back sides of waste paper for scratch pads
		17. Donate used clothing and furniture to worthy organizations
		18. Grow indoor plants to purify the air
		19. Cut down on the use of plastic and foil by storing food in reusable containers
		20. Take your own reusable bags to the grocery store
		21. Use cold water to wash clothes rather than using energy to heat water
		22. Buy recycled products (paper towels and tp, for example)
		23. Use cloth rags and napkins rather than paper towels and paper napkins
		24. Consume less: live simply that all may simply live!

OTHER THINGS WE CAN DO TO CARE FOR GOD'S WORLD:

## Scripture Reading based on Genesis 1:1-2:3 (elementary students)

Reader 1: In the beginning when God was creating the heavens and the earth, the whole universe was covered in darkness.

Reader 2: Then God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light. God called the light Day and the darkness Night. That was on the first day.

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 3: On the second day God made the sky.

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 4: Then God gathered together all the waters of the earth, making the huge oceans, the lakes, and rivers. And dry land appeared, continents and islands, mountains, prairies, and hills. Out of the earth sprang up trees and plants, too many kinds to count. That was the third day.

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 5: God said, "I need to separate the day from the night and the summer from the winter." So God made the sun and moon, the stars and the seasons, all on the fourth day.

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 6: On the fifth day God said, "Let there be swarms of living creatures in the water and in the sky." And God filled the seas and the sky with all kinds of fish and birds and insects and reptiles.

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 7: And God filled the land also with creatures, snakes, and bugs, dogs and armadillos, toads and hippopotamuses, and all other creatures.

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 8: And on the sixth day God made human beings, women and men and girls and boys, and said, "Please take care of all the things I have created."

All: And God said, "It is good."

Reader 9: And on the seventh day, God rested from all the work of creation.

All: And we said, "It is good—way to go, God!"

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