A few years ago, a session hosted by Ecology and Environment, Inc. (E&E) of international environmental leaders at a retreat center in the heart of the Adirondacks led to a remarkable discussion on environmental education. Members of business and government interests from countries stretching from Russia to Brazil and Chile wondered how the internet could be used to connect tomorrow's leaders - our present day students - to share information on the environmental challenges facing planet earth. As the concept unfolded, the idea evolved into finding the right vehicle for teachers and students around the world to share their environmental ideas, solutions, and on the ground environmental projects.

The premise was simple. If a website was to be created where tomorrow's leaders could post and share their environmental solutions and actions, sufficient interaction and interest would be generated among the students to spark more environmentally sound practices worldwide. More importantly, each connection made would foster international collaboration and cooperation across boundaries in common topic interests and thereby prepare these future leaders to be responsible stewards of planet earth.

Ecology and Environment, Inc. led by the company's Chairman, Gerhard Neumaier, and President, Kevin Neumaier, invested the necessary research and resources to build a website where this exchange and dialogue could take place. Outreach was focused on educational and environmental leaders not only in the United States, but also worldwide through E&E's vast international network. E&E is known globally for its environmental services and since its founding in 1970 has completed over 50,000 environmental projects in 115 countries with staff expertise in 85 scientific disciplines. With this experience and expansive set of contacts, E&E believed it was well positioned to truly launch such an effort on an international basis. The program was named Project Earth and its focus was the celebration of environmental projects in schools from kindergarten to high school.

After several beta test sites, www.ProjectEarth.net was up and running in the fall of 2010. Ten countries participated with 50 or so projects in this web based platform where schools around the world posted their environmental projects and innovations. In turn, teachers and students were able to share successes, exchange ideas, and, most importantly, make a difference for planet earth. It has become a site where the content provider is the user, not the host. It is a place where the knowledge is derived from those doing the actions on the ground and they in turn send messages to one another.

While E&E maintains the site and provides useful connections and links to current sources of environmental information, the primary content is provided by the teachers and students doing on the ground environmental projects. They post their successes using text, pictures and video and are organized by subject categories as well as age level and geographic location.

In 2011, with new investments made to Project Earth and more presentations made around the world, new partners emerged from Russia, China and South America as well as in the United States. The Adirondack Research Consortium and the American Forest Foundation were early supporters in the United States. Partners in the Middle East expanded participation in Project Earth using Google translate to break the language barrier. There was also a growing interest in the United States with outreach made to schools nationwide. With this success, the site reached the 1,000 project milestone in summer of 2011 and over 75 countries on its way to today's even greater numbers. Project Earth provided the vehicle to cut across political boundaries as well as language barriers. Its further enhanced Google Translate feature allows teachers and students to post project related information in their native tongue as well as translate any information posted by other teachers and students to a language of choice thereby encouraging easy communication across cultures. World Environment Day and Earth Day contests were held to market and increase participation and students were recognized.

From the fall of 2011 to the spring of 2012, the site's first generation of participants grew to close to 2000 projects coming from 110 countries. Visitation

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from the site on a monthly basis grew from several hundred to over 15,000. It became a remarkable international gathering place for new ideas and the sharing of local environmental successes. It had projects involving energy conservation, habitat restoration and protection, recycling and community gardens to name a few categories.

As more projects were posted, more innovations were found. A school in Mongolia created a public awareness campaign to rid its school building of plastic bags with alternatives. Within a year, their campaign was a success. A school in Florida built a solar car and raced it in a regional competition while a neighboring school re-planted a section of a mangrove habitat. A school in Southeast Asia produced a video to raise awareness about endangered whales while a school in Argentina launched a comprehensive recycling effort. In Kazakhstan a school led the re-planting of a birch forest and in the United Arab Emirates a group of students led the effort to reduce energy consumption. A school in Hawaii created a music video documenting their projects. These are just a handful of examples of where students involved made Project Earth such a resounding success and contributed to its exponentially growth.

In Chile, the Environmental Minister, María Ignacia Benítez, endorsed the program. At a news conference in May of 2011, the Ministry of Environment and Ecology and Environment officials signed an official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The Ministry became the first Project Earth partner to initiate a countrywide program that committed every school in Chile to participate in Project Earth, marking the beginning of a massive educational campaign to help improve the environment. Chilean schools will now work on projects locally to improve air, water, and earth while collaborating with schools in countries around the world through Project Earth.

In other countries, educational partners and international leaders gave their support and collaborated in the promotion of the program. After presentations were made to the Russian Duma in November of 2011, a country-wide campaign began. In 2012, through our Russian partners, Project Earth caught the attention of former President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev said, “To achieve prosperity, innovation needs to be part of our culture. ProjectEarth.net enables students to participate in innovative projects around the world with passion and a willingness to share resources.”

2012. Maurice Strong contacted Environment Ministers worldwide and was responsible for increasing Project Earth participation globally. His planned side event and presentation of Project Earth at Rio+20, where he is a senior advisor to the conference, will mark another milestone for the recognition of these students and the growth of Project Earth as an environmental network and resource around the world. As he says, we need to celebrate today’s youth who are making a difference, for they will be the decision makers of tomorrow.

With these activities in full swing, links were provided on the site for teachers and students so they could be connected to prominent environmental leaders, educational organizations and governments not only to learn about their efforts but also to tap into their resources. Supporters have called Project Earth “a Facebook for school based environmental projects”. Through their feedback and input from the site’s users, further enhancements were made and newsletters were created for teachers to help expand their use and activities on the site. Governments are also using these communication tools to get information about their programs out to the Project Earth network.

Plans after Rio+20 include the following new programmatic advancements and goals:

- **More Earth Day and World Environment Day Contests to be held in future years with increased participation and outreach to worldwide networks.**
- **More Country Specific contests planned in Chile, United Arab Emirates and other countries around the world.**
- **Enhancements to the website which include more interactive functions, resources for teachers and expanded showcase opportunities for projects.**
- **Increased communications to partners, teachers and students including newsletters, alerts and postings on social networking sites.**
• New proposals for US and/or International companies to sponsor regionally specific contests and/or activities.

With these results and plans outlined, the question remains on how far Project Earth can spread and grow. Ecology and Environment believes that there are no boundaries as long as teachers and students are working together to address the challenges faced by their environment. It is the belief that tens to hundreds of thousands of schools around the world are involved in environmental efforts and the task before Project Earth is to reach them, give them recognition and connect them to their counterparts in cultures everywhere.

Ecology and Environment, Inc. will reach out to more governments, environmental education organizations and potential corporate sponsors to support this plan. Project Earth will continue to look to educational institutions to use their networks to spread the word and share their knowledge with the students and teachers involved. It is through these steps and the on-going path Project Earth has chosen that tomorrow’s leaders will be truly connected as they make a difference in their backyard. They are showing how the future health and survival of our planet earth depends on action and collaboration. For more information on Project Earth and ways you or your organization can get involved, go to www.projectearth.net.

To make planet earth a better place and sustainable, the world needs Project Earth and efforts like it in order to pass environmental knowledge from one generation to the next; from one culture to another; through one student, one teacher, one school, one project at a time.

*Cree, timber wolf, Adirondack Wildlife Refuge & Rehabilitation Center, Wilmington, NY*