

PROTECT OUR PLANET

IT'S ELEMENTAL: AIR, LAND, WATER



Protect Our Planet

The air, land, and water around us are changing — and young people are noticing. They're asking questions, making observations, and trying to understand what these changes mean for their world. But knowing what to do with that awareness can be harder. Protect Our Planet, this year's Students Rebuild project, invites young people ages 5–25 to explore the air, land, and water around them and use creativity to share their stories and ideas for a healthier planet.

Through art, writing, performance, photography, digital media, or STEM, students will explore, create, and share. Together, their creativity supports organizations worldwide caring for the air, land, and water we all depend on.

Note to Educators

Because you know your learners and learning environment best, we encourage you to use your professional judgment when selecting, adapting, and implementing Protect Our Planet resources. We recognize that educational settings, community priorities, and local curriculum requirements vary, so please feel free to use these materials in ways that best support your learners and your teaching approach.

Overview

The relationship between people and the natural world is complex, interconnected, and constantly evolving. The land beneath our feet, the water that sustains life, and the air we breathe influence our health, economies, cultures, and communities. Decisions made today about these shared resources will shape the future for generations to come.

In this activity, learners become environmental investigators, journalists, and storytellers. By examining one natural element—air, land, or water—they will explore the environmental, social, cultural, and economic forces that shape their community. Through inquiry, creative expression, and civic reflection, learners will communicate why their chosen element matters and inspire others to imagine a more resilient future.



Learning Objectives

Learners will:

- Investigate the relationship between natural systems and human communities.
- Analyze multiple perspectives on environmental opportunities and challenges.
- Gather and evaluate information from observations, research, and community voices.
- Synthesize evidence into a compelling creative narrative.
- Communicate ideas that encourage civic engagement and environmental stewardship.

Standards

This activity integrates learning across multiple subject areas and supports the following standards:

- **National Core Arts Standards (NCAS):** Creating, Presenting, Responding, Connecting
- **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:** Reading Informational Text, Research Writing, Speaking & Listening
- **Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS):** Science and Engineering Practices; Human Impacts on Earth Systems
- **C3 Framework for Social Studies:** Inquiry, Civic Engagement, Taking Informed Action

Materials

- Notebooks or journals for observation notes and reflection
- Clipboards (if observing outdoors)
- Cameras or smartphones for photographing the chosen element
- Access to research sources: library books, articles, local organization websites, or internet access
- Graphic organizers or research note templates
- Pencils/pens, sketching paper

**Additional materials will vary according to which option learners choose to complete during Step 3 of the activity.*

Time

Estimated Total Time: Approximately **190 – 405 minutes** (3 hours 10 minutes – 6 hours 45 minutes) without the optional showcase (extension)

This activity is designed to be flexible and is intended to be completed over multiple class periods. Parts of the activity may also be omitted. The suggested times for each step are estimates and may be adjusted to meet the needs of your learners, classroom schedule, and learning goals.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt the lesson as needed. You may choose to complete the entire activity or select only the sections that best fit your available instructional time and curriculum. Each step can stand alone or be combined with others, allowing learners to engage in meaningful learning whether the lesson is completed over several days or incorporated into existing classroom instruction.

Essential Question

How can creative storytelling deepen our understanding of environmental challenges and inspire collective action within our communities?

1

Investigate Your Community | 35 - 60 minutes

Invite learners to select one natural element to investigate:

- Air
- Land
- Water

Encourage learners to explore how this element influences both the natural and human systems within their community. Learners should document observations using photographs, field notes, sketches, interviews, audio recordings, maps, or journal entries.

Whenever possible, provide time for learners to conduct field observations in a local outdoor setting. If this is not feasible, learners may complete their investigation independently in a safe, accessible location.

Guide learners with questions such as:

- How has this element shaped your community historically and today?
- Who benefits from this element?
- Who is disproportionately affected when it is threatened?
- What evidence of environmental change or resilience do you observe?
- What stories are missing from public conversations about this place?

2

Consider Multiple Perspectives | 45 - 90 minutes

Guide learners in deepening their understanding through multiple forms of inquiry. Teachers may emphasize academic research, community-based learning, field investigation, or interdisciplinary exploration.

Learners may:

- Analyze scientific studies or environmental data
- Review historical records or archival photographs
- Examine maps or geographic information
- Conduct interviews with residents, scientists, activists, artists, or local officials
- Investigate news coverage and media representations
- Compare differing viewpoints surrounding environmental issues
- Explore cultural, historical, Indigenous, or artistic connections to the chosen element

Encourage learners to investigate questions, including:

- Why is this element significant?
- How has it changed over time?
- What environmental, economic, or social issues affect it?
- Who makes decisions about its future?
- Whose voices are represented, and whose voices are missing?
- What opportunities exist for positive change?

Provide opportunities for learners to organize, discuss, and evaluate their findings before beginning their creative project.

3

Create for Change | 60 - 180 minutes

Challenge learners to transform their investigation into a compelling creative work that combines evidence, storytelling, and personal perspective.

Option 1: Environmental Documentary (Media Arts)

Learners produce a short investigative video or multimedia presentation that explores the story of one natural element—air, land, or water—and its relationship to their community.

Encourage learners to combine original footage, photographs, interviews, narration, historical materials, maps, data visualizations, and other media to create a compelling, evidence-based narrative.

As learners develop their documentary, encourage them to consider questions such as:

- What story am I trying to tell about this element and my community?
- Why is this element essential to the people, culture, economy, or ecosystems of my community?
- What environmental issue, opportunity, or change deserves greater attention?
- Whose voices and perspectives should be included?
- What evidence best supports my message?
- How can I present this issue in a way that informs, engages, and inspires my audience?
- What future do I hope viewers imagine after watching my documentary?

Documentaries should include:

- An introduction that establishes the importance of the chosen natural element.
- Evidence gathered through observations, research, interviews, or community perspectives.
- Multiple viewpoints surrounding an environmental issue connected to the element.
- An analysis of how the issue affects the community today and may shape its future.
- A conclusion that offers realistic actions, solutions, or possibilities for positive change.

Encourage learners to think like documentary filmmakers by balancing factual information with compelling storytelling that helps audiences better understand both the issue and the people connected to it.



Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Plan the story:** Identify the main message viewers should remember. Decide what evidence, interviews, footage, photographs, maps, or other media will best support that message, and consider how each piece of evidence contributes to the overall story.
3. **Create a storyboard:** Sketch or outline each scene in the order it will appear. Include what viewers will see, what they will hear, and what information or evidence will be presented in each section.
4. **Capture the media:** Record original video, photographs, interviews, narration, or other visuals that support the story. Be sure to obtain permission before photographing or interviewing others and credit any found media.
5. **Build the documentary:** Organize the footage, narration, interviews, and visuals into a logical sequence that clearly communicates the message while incorporating evidence and multiple perspectives.
6. **Highlight the issue:** Explain how the chosen element affects the community today. Support the analysis with evidence gathered through research, observations, interviews, or data.
7. **End with possibility:** Conclude the documentary by sharing realistic solutions, actions, or hopes for the future.
8. **Reflect:** Review the documentary for accuracy, clarity, and impact. Ask whether the evidence supports the message, whether multiple perspectives are represented, and whether the documentary informs, engages, and inspires the audience.
9. **Share:** Present the documentary to peers, educators, and the community.

Option 2: Visual Storytelling (Visual Arts)

Create a photo essay or digital story using original photography, illustration, mixed media, or a combination of visual formats. Images should work together to tell a cohesive story about the relationship between the chosen natural element and the community.

Each image should include a title or caption that provides context, explains its significance, or encourages viewers to think more deeply about the issues presented.

As learners develop their visual narrative, encourage them to consider questions such as:

- What story am I trying to tell?
- How does this natural element shape the identity of my community?
- What moments, places, or people best illustrate this relationship?
- What challenges, opportunities, or contradictions should viewers notice?
- What emotions or ideas do I want my audience to experience?
- How can my sequence of images guide viewers from understanding to empathy, and ultimately to action?

Conclude the photo essay or digital story with an image that conveys their vision for the community's future and the natural element.



Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Choose the story:** Decide what message viewers need to remember about the chosen element and its relationship to the community.
3. **Plan the visual narrative:** Identify the people, places, moments, and details that will best communicate the message. Consider how each image will contribute to the overall story.
4. **Create the images:** Take original photographs or create original illustrations, digital artwork, or mixed-media pieces. Be intentional about composition, lighting, perspective, and subject matter to strengthen the visual storytelling.
5. **Select the strongest work:** Review all of the images and choose those that most effectively communicate the message. Consider whether each image adds something meaningful to the story.
6. **Organize the sequence:** Arrange the images in a logical order that guides viewers through the narrative. Think about how each image connects to the next and how the sequence builds understanding, emotion, and engagement.
7. **Add titles and captions:** Give each image a title or caption that provides context, explains its significance, or encourages viewers to think more deeply about the issues presented.
8. **End with hope:** Conclude the photo essay or digital story with an image that illustrates the vision for the future of the community and the natural element. Consider what positive actions, possibilities, or changes viewers should imagine.
9. **Reflect:** Review the visual story for clarity, accuracy, and impact. Ask whether the images and captions work together to communicate the intended message and inspire viewers to think differently about the relationship between people and the natural world.
10. **Share:** Present the photo essay or digital story to peers, educators, or the community. Encourage the audience to discuss the ideas, questions, and possible actions inspired by the work.

Option 3: Voices of the Elements (Performing Arts)

Create an original spoken word performance, dramatic monologue, song, movement piece, or multimedia performance from the perspective of the chosen natural element.

Encourage learners to imagine they are giving a voice to the air, land, or water they investigated. Their performance should combine creativity with insights gained through observation, research, and community perspectives.

As learners develop their performance, encourage them to consider questions such as:

- What story does this element want to tell?
- What has it witnessed throughout history and within your community?
- How have people benefited from, cared for, or exploited it?
- What challenges or changes threaten its future?
- How might different people experience or value this element in different ways?
- What emotions do I want my audience to feel?
- If this element could speak directly to humanity, what message or call to action would it share?

Encourage learners to think beyond simply giving the element a voice. Their performance should invite the audience to reflect on humanity's relationship with the natural world while inspiring empathy, curiosity, or action.

Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Plan the message:** Think about what the chosen element wants people to understand about its role in the community, the challenges it faces, and the future it hopes for. Consider the central message it may want the audience to remember.
3. **Choose the performance style:** Decide whether the piece will be a spoken word poem, dramatic monologue, original song, movement piece, or multimedia performance. Select the format that best communicates the message.
4. **Create the performance:** Write, choreograph, compose, or develop an original performance from the perspective of the chosen element. Use descriptive language, imagery, movement, music, or other creative techniques to bring the element's voice to life.
5. **Strengthen the story:** Incorporate ideas inspired by earlier observations, research, interviews, and community perspectives. Consider how different people, cultures, or living organisms experience and depend on the chosen element.
6. **Refine the work:** Revise the performance to improve its clarity, creativity, emotional impact, and overall flow. Make sure every part of the performance supports the central message.
7. **Rehearse:** Practice the performance several times. Focus on pacing, expression, movement, voice, or stage presence so the message is communicated with confidence and purpose.
8. **Reflect:** Review the performance and consider whether it encourages empathy, curiosity, or action. Ask whether the audience will better understand the relationship between people and the natural world after experiencing the work.
9. **Perform:** Share the performance with peers, educators, or the community. Encourage the audience to reflect on the message and discuss how they can help care for the natural world.

Option 4: Environmental Installation (Visual Arts)

Create a multi-panel artwork, installation, or mixed-media piece that explores the relationship between people and the natural world.

Learners may work in two or three dimensions and are encouraged to incorporate a variety of materials, symbols, textures, or found objects that strengthen the meaning of their work.

Each panel or aspect of the piece should communicate a distinct part of the overall story:

Panel 1: The Element

Introduce the chosen natural element. Establish its significance by highlighting its beauty, character, or role within the community.

Panel 2: Connections

Explore the relationship between people and the element. Consider how it shapes daily life, culture, identity, recreation, livelihoods, or local ecosystems.

Panel 3: Challenges and Perspectives

Illustrate an environmental issue, tension, or opportunity affecting the element. Incorporate different perspectives or highlight a question that encourages viewers to think critically about the issue.



Panel 4: A Vision for the Future

Imagine a future in which people and the natural world thrive together. Communicate realistic actions, hope, resilience, or solutions that can help create positive change.

As learners develop their artwork, encourage them to consider questions such as:

- What central idea or message do I want viewers to remember?
- How can color, composition, symbolism, or materials communicate my message?
- How does my artwork reflect what I discovered during my investigation?
- What relationships between people and the environment am I highlighting?
- What emotions or questions do I want my audience to leave with?
- What possibilities for the future does my artwork imagine?

Ask learners to accompany their artwork with a brief artist statement explaining how their investigation informed their creative choices and how the work communicates the story of their chosen natural element.

Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Choose the message:** Decide what viewers should understand about the chosen natural element and its relationship to the community. Consider the central idea or question the artwork should explore.
3. **Plan the artwork:** Sketch or outline ideas before creating. Think about how each panel or section will contribute to the overall story and how colors, materials, symbols, textures, and composition can strengthen the message.
4. **Create Panel 1 (The Element):** Introduce the chosen natural element by highlighting its beauty, character, importance, or role within the community. Help viewers understand why this element matters.
5. **Create Panel 2 (Connections):** Show how people and the natural element influence one another. Consider how the element shapes daily life, culture, recreation, livelihoods, identity, wildlife, or local ecosystems.
6. **Create Panel 3 (Challenges and Perspectives):** Illustrate an environmental issue, opportunity, or multiple viewpoints connected to the chosen element. Encourage viewers to think critically by raising a question, presenting contrasting perspectives, or highlighting the complexity of the issue.
7. **Create Panel 4 (A Vision for the Future):** Imagine a future in which people and the natural world thrive together. Communicate realistic actions, hope, resilience, or solutions that could help create positive change within the community.
8. **Write an Artist Statement:** Compose a brief artist statement explaining how the investigation, research, observations, and community perspectives influenced the creative choices. Describe how the artwork communicates the story of the chosen natural element and the message viewers will hopefully take away.
9. **Reflect:** Review the installation and artist statement for clarity, creativity, and impact. Consider whether the different panels work together to communicate a cohesive story and whether the artwork encourages viewers to think differently about the relationship between people and the natural world.
10. **Exhibit:** Display the artwork for peers, educators, families, or community members. Invite viewers to engage with the work by asking questions, sharing reflections, and discussing how creativity can inspire environmental awareness and positive action.

4

Take Action | 45 - 60 minutes

Prepare a collaborative mural representing land, water, and sky.

Provide learners with pre-cut paper shapes representing each element:

- Leaves (Land)
- Water Droplets (Water)
- Clouds (Air)

Invite participants to complete one of the following prompts:

- One action I will take is...
- One change I want to see in my community is...

Add each contribution to the mural, creating a growing Community Ecosystem that represents the collective commitment of the learning community.

Encourage learners to revisit the mural throughout the year as a reminder that meaningful change begins with individual actions that inspire collective impact.

5

Submit to Students Rebuild | 5 - 15 minutes

Take a photo of what your students created and share it at studentsrebuild.org. Creative Visions will donate \$5, up to \$1 million for each submission or student engaged. The project is open from September 8, 2026 - June 1, 2027.



6

Share Your Message (Extension) | 60 - 180 minutes

Host an "Our Community, Our Elements" Showcase where learners present their work to classmates, educators, families, and community members.

Possible showcase formats include:

- Documentary Film Festival
- Gallery Exhibition
- Spoken Word Showcase
- Community Arts Exhibition
- Environmental Symposium

Invite audience members to actively engage with each project by leaving written reflections, asking questions, or contributing ideas.

Reflection prompts may include:

- What new perspective did this project give you?
- What evidence or story stayed with you?
- How has this work influenced your thinking?
- What action could you take to strengthen your community?

Conclude the event with a facilitated discussion or panel exploring the role of storytelling in shaping public understanding and inspiring civic action.

