

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 connection between people and the natural world is tangible and enduring. The land shapes where we live, water sustains our communities, and the air we breathe impacts our health and well-being. Every community is defined by the natural elements that surround it, creating a unique relationship between the people and the place.

In this activity, learners become environmental journalists and storytellers by exploring one natural element—air, land, or water—that plays an important role in their community. Through observation, research, creative expression, and reflection, they will examine how this element shapes daily life, identify challenges and opportunities, and share their vision for protecting and caring for the places we call home.



Learning Objectives

Learners will:

- Investigate how land, water, or air shapes their community.
- Analyze how people interact with and affect natural systems.
- Gather information through observation, research, and community perspectives.
- Communicate their findings through creative storytelling.
- Propose realistic actions that help protect and strengthen their communities.

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 **155 – 270 minutes** (2 hours 35 minutes – 4 hours 30 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 understanding the stories of air, land, or water inspire people to care for the communities they call home?

1

Investigate Your Community | 30 - 45 minutes

Invite learners to select one natural element to investigate:

- Air
- Land
- Water

Encourage learners to observe their chosen element in their neighborhood, at school, in a park, or another local location. Learners should document their observations through photographs, sketches, field notes, audio recordings, or journal entries.

If possible, provide learners with time during class to explore an outdoor space on or near campus. If an outdoor investigation is not feasible, ask learners to complete their observations independently outside of class at a location accessible to them.

Guide learners with questions such as:

- How does this element shape life in your community?
- Who depends on it?
- How do people interact with it?
- What evidence do you see of people caring for, or harming, it?
- What aspects of this element and its role within your community would you want to investigate further?

2

Investigate and Deepen Understanding | 30 - 50 minutes

Invite learners to deepen their understanding of their chosen natural element using one or more methods of inquiry. Teachers may choose to emphasize academic research, hands-on exploration, creative investigation, or a combination of approaches based on their instructional goals.

Possible methods include:

- Conducting online or library research using reliable sources
- Reading books, articles, maps, or historical documents
- Interviewing family members, community leaders, or local experts
- Collecting observations during additional field investigations
- Examining photographs, satellite images, or historical images
- Analyzing local news stories or environmental data
- Listening to podcasts or watching documentaries
- Creating surveys or interviewing classmates about their experiences
- Inviting a guest speaker to share their knowledge
- Comparing how the element has changed over time using primary and secondary sources



Encourage learners to explore questions such as:

- Why is this element important to your community?
- What stories does this element tell about where you live?
- How do people depend on it?
- What challenges or opportunities affect it?
- Who is working to care for or improve it?
- How has it changed over time?
- What different perspectives exist about its future?

Learners may organize their thinking using methods that best support their learning, including:

- Journals or field notes
- Graphic organizers
- Sketches or diagrams
- Mind maps
- Research notes
- Digital presentations
- Audio recordings
- Collaborative discussion

Conclude the investigation by providing opportunities for learners to share what they discovered through partner conversations, small-group discussions, gallery walks, or whole-class reflection. Encourage learners to identify common themes, surprising discoveries, and questions they still have before moving into the creative storytelling phase.

3

Create for Change | 45 - 60 minutes

Invite learners to go deeper with the creative project. Encourage them to combine factual information with compelling storytelling.

Learners may choose one of the following options:

Option 1: Environmental Documentary (Media Arts)

Learners create a short film or narrated slideshow that explains:

- Why their element matters
- How it shapes their community
- A challenge it faces
- One realistic solution that could make a positive difference
- How they imagine the future if their community protects this element



Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Learn about the element:** Research why the element is important and how it supports the community. Some of the earlier research may be applicable here.

Tip:

*Use websites from reputable organizations, such as museums, universities, conservation organizations, or educational institutions, to help ensure the information is accurate and up to date.

3. **Identify a challenge:** Find one problem the element faces, such as pollution, wildfires, or overgrazing.
4. **Think of a solution:** Choose one realistic action that people can take to help protect the element.
5. **Imagine the future:** Show what the community could look like if people work together to care for the element.
6. **Create the documentary or slideshow:** Make a short video or narrated slideshow that shares the ideas using images, video clips, drawings, narration, music, or text.

Tips:

Use visuals that support the message: Include photos, drawings, maps, or short video clips that help the audience understand the ideas.

Keep it clear and concise: Speak slowly, use easy-to-read text, and focus on the most important information so the audience can easily follow along.

7. **Review the work:** Make sure the documentary or slideshow explains why the element matters, the challenge it faces, a proposed solution, and a hope for the future.
8. **Share the documentary or slideshow:** Present the finished project to the class or community, and encourage others to help protect our planet.



Option 2: Photo Essay (Visual Arts)

Learners create a photo essay using original photographs or illustrations.

Each image should include captions explaining:

- What the image shows
- Why it matters
- What message they want others to understand

Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Plan the photo essay:** Think about the story of the chosen element and how it supports the community.
3. **Take photos or create illustrations:** Capture or create images that show the element, how it helps people, plants, or animals. Also, show a challenge the element faces.
4. **Write captions:** For each image, explain:
 - What the image shows
 - Why the image matters
 - What viewers should understand about the element
5. **End with hope:** The final image should show how people's involvement can positively impact the future of the element and the community.
6. **Organize the images:** Make sure the photos or illustrations are in an order that tells a clear and impactful story.
7. **Review the work:** Make sure the images tell the real story and that each caption matches the image and supports the story.
8. **Share the photo essay.** Present the completed photo essay to the class or community to encourage others to help protect our planet.

Option 3: Voices of the Elements (Performing Arts)

Learners imagine their chosen element has a voice and create a:

- Spoken word performance
- Original song
- Rap
- Dramatic monologue
- Movement or dance performance

Learners should imagine they are the voice of their chosen natural element and answer the following questions from its perspective:

- What have I witnessed?
- How do humans depend on me?
- What challenges do I face?
- What do I hope people will do to help me?

Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Imagine the element can speak:** What would it say:
 - About what it has seen
 - How it has helped people and other organisms
 - What might it want people to know
3. **Choose the performance style:** Pick what resonates most, what feels the most enjoyable, and what will make the message most impactful.
 - Choices include, but are not limited to:
 - Spoken word
 - Original song/rap
 - Movement/dance
4. **Brainstorm before creation:** Answer these questions from the element's point of view to find meaningful insights:
 - What have I witnessed?
 - How do humans depend on me?
 - What challenges do I face?
 - What do I hope people will do to help me?
7. **Create the performance:** Use words, voice, music, or movement to bring the element to life.
8. **Practice the performance:** To gain confidence, rehearse all parts of the performance.
9. **Share the performance:** Perform for the class or community to encourage others to consider ways they can help protect the natural world.



Option 4: Polyptych Visual Artwork (Visual Arts)

Learners create a four-panel artwork that tells the story of their community.

Panel 1: The Element

Illustrate the air, land, or water that defines the community.

Panel 2: Its Impact

Show how the element influences everyday life.

Panel 3: What Others Should Know

Communicate an important message or challenge a misconception about the community.

Panel 4: Hope for the Future

Imagine how the community can care for and protect this natural element.

Learners may use painting, drawing, collage, photography, mixed media, or digital art.

Polyptych: a work of art—such as a painting, relief, or photograph—that is divided into multiple panels or sections.

Directions:

1. **Choose an element:** Pick air, land, or water.
2. **Plan the four panels:** Think of the story about to be told. The artwork should tell the story of the community and the chosen element.
3. **Create Panel 1 (The Element):** Illustrate how the air, land, or water helps define the community.
4. **Create Panel 2 (Its Impact):** Show how the element supports people, plants, animals, or everyday life in the community.
5. **Create Panel 3 (What Others Should Know):** Share an important message about the community or correct a common misunderstanding about the chosen element.
6. **Create Panel 4 (Hope for the Future):** Illustrate how the community can protect and care for this natural element for future generations.
7. **Choose the artistic style:** Create the artwork using painting, drawing, collage, photography, mixed media, or digital art.
8. **Share the artwork:** Present the four-panel story to the class or community and explain the message behind each panel.

4

Take Action | 30 - 60 minutes

Prepare a collaborative bulletin board or mural that features land, water, and air. Before each learner or visitor leaves, provide them with pre-cut paper shapes that represent each natural element, such as:

- Clouds for air
- Leaves for land
- Water droplets for water

Invite participants to complete the following statements on their chosen shape:

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

As learners and visitors add their completed shapes to the mural, they create a growing Community Ecosystem that reflects a shared commitment to caring for the environment.

By the end of the showcase, the display serves as a visual reminder that many small actions—across air, land, and water—can come together to create meaningful change.

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 Story (Extension) | 60 - 180 minutes

Presentations may be shared with peers, families, school staff, or community members.

Possible showcase formats include:

- Documentary Film Festival
- Gallery Walk
- Spoken Word and Performance Showcase
- Environmental Awareness Fair

As visitors explore the showcase, invite them to interact with the projects by leaving comments, asking questions, or sharing their own connections to the featured natural elements.

Consider providing sticky notes, index cards, or a digital discussion board where visitors can respond to prompts such as:

- What is one new idea or fact you learned today?
- Which project inspired you most, and why?
- What is one action you can take to care for your community's air, land, or water?
- What natural place in your community is meaningful to you?

Conclude the showcase with a brief panel discussion, class discussion, or community discussion about how storytelling can increase awareness, strengthen community connections, and inspire environmental stewardship.

