

PROtect OUR PLAnet

CREATIVE EXPRESSION TOOLKIT: WATER



Protect Our Planet: The Water That Sustains Us

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Protect Our Planet

The air, land, and water around us are changing – and young people feel the weight of it. They're paying attention, forming opinions, imagining their futures on a changing planet. But knowing what to do with that awareness is harder. Protect Our Planet gives students a chance to learn, create, and take action. Protect Our Planet is this year's Students Rebuild project, inviting young people around the world, ages 5 – 25, to explore the air, land, and water around them — and use creativity to share their stories and vision for a thriving world.

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 around us.

The Water That Sustains Us

Every day, we drink it, cook with it, grow food with it, play in it, and depend on it for life. Water is much more than lakes, rivers, and oceans. It flows through streams and wetlands, falls as rain and snow, moves beneath the ground, and travels through every living thing. Water connects ecosystems, communities, and people around the world.

Healthy water sustains life in countless ways. It provides hydration, nourishes crops, supports plants and animals, shapes landscapes, carries nutrients, creates habitats where living things can thrive, and helps regulate Earth's climate. Through the water cycle, water is constantly moving, connecting the sky, the land, and the sea.

Water is always changing. Rain, snow, floods, storms, and seasonal changes all influence the water around us. Human activities can also affect water quality and availability in different ways, impacting people, wildlife, and ecosystems.

Through Protect Our Planet, students are invited to explore the many stories of water and share what they learn through creative expression. Whether creating visual art, writing, or digital media, every project helps inspire others to better understand and care for the water that sustains us.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is organized in three stages — Explore, Create, and Share. Together they carry learners from understanding the water that sustains us, to making something that captures what they discovered, to sharing it with others. Use as much or as little of each stage as fits your learners and setting.

Explore. Learners investigate the water around them using four big ideas, discussion prompts, a booklist, and supplemental resources that build understanding.

Create. Learners turn what they discovered into visual art, writing, or performance, supported by the materials, creative elements, and project ideas provided.

Share. Learners exhibit their work, submit it to studentsrebuild.org, and invite their community to notice and protect the water.



1

Explore

In this section: Use the questions below to help your learners explore the element of water. Review the booklist and resources guide at the end of this section to support their discovery.

Explore the Water

Water is much more than the lakes, rivers, oceans, and streams we can see. It is a living system that connects people, plants, animals, ecosystems, and communities around the world.

Ask your learners to consider these four big ideas about the water that sustains us.

1. The Living Water

Healthy water is full of life.

Beneath the surface of every pond, stream, river, lake, wetland, or ocean is a hidden world of living organisms. A single drop of healthy water may contain algae, plankton, bacteria, microscopic animals, and countless other tiny living things that form the foundation of aquatic food webs. Together, these organisms cycle nutrients, produce oxygen, and support healthy ecosystems, making it possible for fish, amphibians, birds, mammals, plants, and people to thrive.

As your learners explore and think about the water that sustains us, they should consider questions such as:

- What kinds of plants, animals, or other living things depend on the water where they live?
- What bodies of water are found in their communities? Are there streams, ponds, rivers, wetlands, lakes, beaches, or oceans nearby?
- What signs tell them that water is healthy? Are there signs that suggest it could be healthier?
- How do people in their communities depend on water every day?
- What is one thing they could do to help care for the water where they live?

2. The Water That Sustains

Healthy water supports life every day.

Water provides drinking water, helps grow the food we eat, supports plants and animals, carries nutrients, creates habitats, supports recreation, and plays an important role in producing energy and many of the products we use. It also moves continuously through the water cycle, connecting the sky, the land, and the sea while sustaining life around the world.

As your learners continue to learn about the water that sustains us, ask them to consider questions such as:

- Where does their drinking water come from?
- How does water help grow the food we eat?
- How does water support people, plants, and animals in your community?
- Why are rivers, lakes, wetlands, and oceans important?

3. When the Water Is Changed

When water changes, so does the life it supports.

The water that sustains us changes naturally over time in numerous ways. Sometimes the change is part of a natural process, and sometimes the change is influenced by human activities.

As your learners study changes in the water around them, ask them to consider which of the following processes might have contributed:

- Flooding
- Drought
- Pollution
- Litter and waste
- Harmful algal blooms
- Habitat loss
- Erosion
- Invasive species

Also, they should consider these questions:

- How do these changes affect people?
- How do they affect plants and animals?
- How do these changes affect your community?

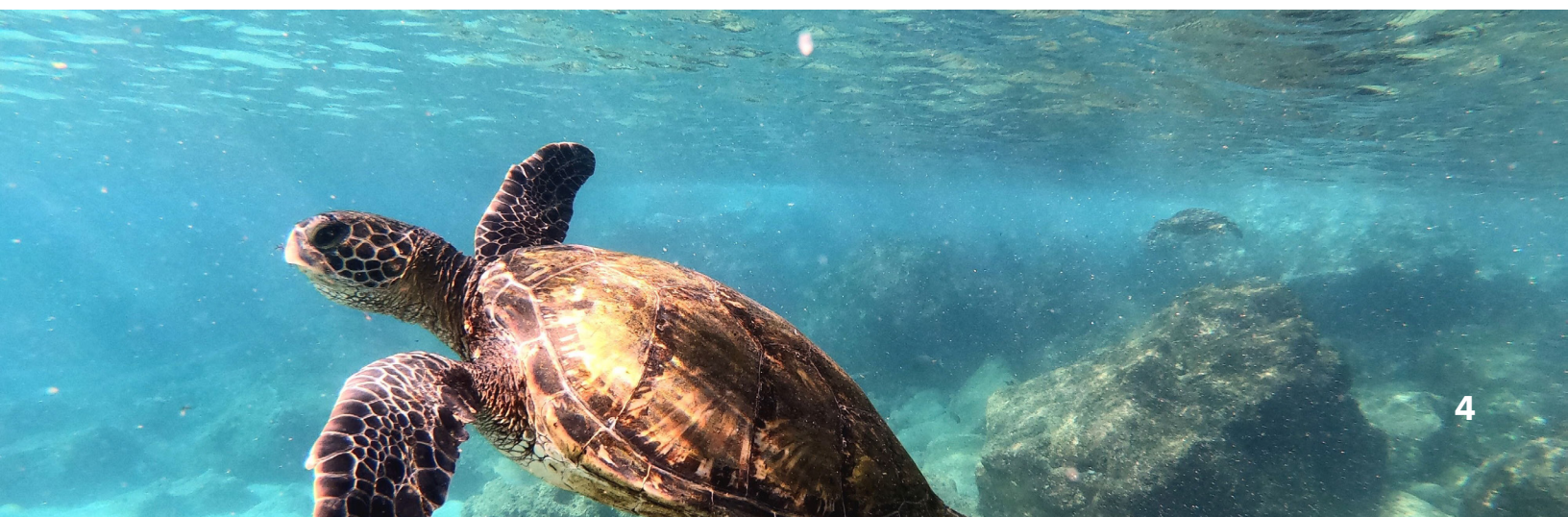
4. The Water We Protect

Our choices help protect the water every day.

Conserving water, reducing pollution and waste, planting native vegetation along waterways, protecting wetlands, properly disposing of hazardous materials, reducing stormwater runoff, and participating in community cleanups are all ways people can help keep water healthy. Even small actions can improve water quality, protect wildlife, and help ensure that clean water continues to sustain people, plants, and animals for generations to come.

As your learners consider ways in which they and their communities can help protect the water that sustains us, ask them to think about these questions:

- How can one person make a difference?
- How can a community make a difference?
- What is one action they could take to help care for the water where they live?
- What is one step they would like to see the community take to help protect local water?



Booklist

Use the books below to help your learners answer the questions above and more!

[The Mess That We Made](#) By Michelle Lord, Illustrated by Julia Blattman | Ages 5-7

This rhyming picture book paints a vivid picture of how trash and plastic have overwhelmed the ocean and the creatures living in it. The vibrant illustrations capture the scale of the problem and then pivot towards hope through cleanup and action. Includes real facts about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

[Ocean Soup: A Recipe for You, Me, and a Cleaner Sea](#) By Meeg Pincus, Illustrated by Lucy Semple | Ages 6-9

Readers learn how plastic pollution affects oceans and marine animals. The book explains how people can help keep waterways clean.

[Blue Planet: Life in our Oceans and Rivers](#) By Moira Butterfield, Illustrated by Jonathan Woodward | Ages 6-9

This book introduces children to the animals that live in the world's oceans, rivers, lakes, and ponds. It also presents fascinating facts about the water cycle, different modes of transportation in water, and how water is prepared for drinking.

[Global](#) By Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin, Illustrated by Giovanni Rigano | Ages 9-12

Two young teens, one living near the Arctic Circle in Canada and the other in the Bay of Bengal, both come across lasting dangers as the rising waters impact their communities and homes. An illustrated survival story amidst the threat of climate change.

[Water](#) By Subhash Vyam and Gita Wolf | Ages 12-14

A tale woven around a Gond fable about water, artist Subhash Vyam muses on the history of our relationship to this most primeval of elements. Wolf addresses the need for all communities to take action to preserve nature and the people's chances at survival.

[The Last Whale](#) By Chris Vick | Ages 12+

From killers to conservationists, the story of three generations of the Petersen family, their history as whale hunters, and later their mission to save the great whales and our planet. Vick presents a strong focus on never giving up on one's morals or passion, even beyond a single lifetime.

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.

Supplemental Resources

Use the resources below to help your learners answer the questions above and more!

Age	Resources	Description
5+	Smithsonian Ocean Portal Educators' Corner Smithsonian Ocean	Students can explore the ocean virtually via the National Smithsonian Museum of Natural History website, which features an Educators' Corner with featured activities and lesson plans to bring the ocean to life for learners.
5+	Ocean Literacy Scope and Sequence for Grades K–12	An instructional tool from the National Marine Educator's Association geared to help students understand the ocean in ever more complex ways across years of thoughtful, coherent science instruction.
5 - 10	GLOBE Program: Water Module	In this story-based module, students will learn how scientists use macroinvertebrates to study water quality, know how to take measurements with scientific tools and how to apply their measurements to a scientific investigation.
5 - 10	Paper Plate Fish Lesson	This 30-minute lesson from MOOREA Coral Reef LTER Education is a fun, basic craft and can be adapted to incorporate structure and function lessons in a classroom setting. Students will build their own fish from a paper plate, decorate it, and learn about the function of each of their fish's fins in the process.
11- 14	What is a Coral Reef?	In this lesson from MOOREA Coral Reef LTER Education, students will gain an understanding of the basic components of a coral reef ecosystem, with emphasis on specific factors crucial to reef health and trophic level relationships among key organisms. Also included in the lesson is an opportunity for students to learn about traditional, Polynesian culture and the native uses of coral reef resources.
8+	How deep is the ocean? TED-Ed	In this lesson, Tech Insider's animation on the depth of the ocean puts the actual distance into perspective, showing a vast distance between the waves we see and the mysterious point we call Challenger Deep.

Age	Resources	Description
8+	How big is the ocean? - Scott Gass TED-Ed	In this lesson, Scott Gass reminds us of the influence humans have on the ocean and the influence it has on us. While the Earth's oceans are known as five separate entities, there is really only one ocean. So, how big is it? As of 2013, it takes up 71% of the Earth, houses 99% of the biosphere, and contains some of Earth's grandest geological features.
10+	The nurdles' quest for ocean domination - Kim Preshoff TED-Ed	In this lesson, Kim Preshoff details the nurdles' quest for ocean domination, shedding light on the particular features that allow these pervasive pollutants to persist for entire generations. Nurdles are the tiny, factory-made pellets that form the raw material for every plastic product that we use, from toys to toothbrushes. And while they look pretty harmless on land, they can really wreak havoc on our ocean.
14+	The brilliance of bioluminescence - Leslie Kenna TED-Ed	In this lesson, Leslie Kenna investigates the magical glow of bioluminescence — and our quest to replicate it. The firefly, the anglerfish, and a few more surprising creatures use this ability in many ways, including survival, hunting, and mating.



2

Create

In this section: Now that you've explored land, it's time to create! Pick one or more of the ideas below to help your learners put their insights into action - or make up your own activity! Whatever you do, remember to submit the project at studentsrebuild.org to spark a \$5 donation to organizations protecting the planet.

Working with Older Students

The project ideas that follow can be adapted for learners of all ages.

Older students may choose to explore more sophisticated approaches within their chosen discipline. Visual artists might experiment with sculpture, papier-mâché, mixed media, ceramics, photography, or digital illustration. Writers may develop poems, narratives, or graphic stories. Media artists might produce documentaries, podcasts, animations, or public service announcements.

We can't wait to see what you create!

Materials

There are countless ways to participate in the Protect Our Planet challenge. Some projects require only paper and pencils, while others may incorporate digital tools or recycled materials.

For students creating visual artwork, we encourage the use of upcycled and recycled materials whenever possible.

Want to reduce waste and share your learners' projects?

Photograph, scan, or record your finished project before submitting it to studentsrebuild.org. For a wider local reach, consider displaying artwork, sharing writing, or screening media projects at school, in a local library, or at a community center to encourage others to appreciate and protect local habitats.

Creative Elements

Whether students choose visual arts, literary arts, or media arts, encourage them to think carefully about how creative choices help communicate ideas.

Visual Arts

- Shape and Form
- Color, Value, and Texture
- Scale
- Movement

Literary Arts

- Voice
- Imagery
- Perspective
- Word Choice

Media Arts

- Storytelling
- Composition
- Sound
- Pacing
- Audience

Process

Promote healthy creative behaviors, problem solving, and 21st century skills by engaging your students in these practices:

Problem solve and explore

Creating can require problem-solving, iterations, and experimentation. Allow your students time and space to play with and explore the materials to discover what will work best in making their art.

Collaborate

Consider having students work in pairs or small groups to create several organisms. Teamwork and artistic collaboration can help students brainstorm creative ideas, facilitate informal dialogue about the organism and the environmental issues it faces, and encourage peer-to-peer learning and motivation.

Stretch and take risks

We know that making art may cause discomfort and can be a vulnerable experience. Create a respectful, safe space for students to take risks and stretch their abilities by avoiding negative judgments and by not defining a “right” or “wrong” way for student artwork to look. Focus on positive artistic behaviors instead of visual outcomes.

Persist

Students’ creations might not match their vision at first, or materials and techniques might not work out as planned. Provide constructive feedback and supportive reassurance to help students persist and work through creative or artistic challenges.

Students Rebuild is designed to enable youth to address pressing global issues through a creative call to action. We value the thoughtfulness, creativity, effort, and learning that go into the artwork of all our young people.



Note: Unlike the rest of this guide, the activities below address students directly rather than educators. Share them as written, or adapt as needed.

Creative Project Idea #1: Visual Arts

Inside a Drop

Water may look simple, but every drop tells a story. A single drop of water can contain tiny living organisms, minerals, nutrients, reflections of the world around us, or even pollution. It also connects to the water cycle, moving through the air, land, plants, animals, and people. Although we often think of water as rivers, lakes, or oceans, every drop is part of a much larger system that makes life possible.

Your challenge is to imagine shrinking down and exploring the world inside a single drop of water.

Create a three-dimensional work of art that reveals what might exist within or around your drop. Your artwork can be realistic, imaginative, or a combination of both. Help viewers discover the hidden stories, life, and connections found in one tiny drop of water.

Directions

1. Choose Your Water Story

Think about what kind of drop of water you want to explore.

Your drop might come from:

- A puddle after a rainstorm
- A river, lake, stream, or ocean
- A cloud or rain
- A glacier or snowflake
- A drinking fountain
- A wetland
- A plant or flower

2. Investigate

Learn about your drop through books, reliable websites, observations, or conversations with members of your community.

Consider questions such as:

- What living things might be found in or around this water?
- Where has this water been?
- How does it support life?
- Could pollution or human activity affect it?
- What surprising things might viewers discover inside this drop?



3. Design Your Artwork

Sketch your ideas before you begin building.

Think about:

- What story will my drop tell?
- What might viewers notice first?
- What details will they discover as they look more closely?
- How can color, texture, shape, and materials help communicate my ideas?

4. Build Your Sculpture

Papier-mâché is one option for creating a three-dimensional sculpture. If you choose this technique, follow the steps below. You may also choose another sculptural medium such as clay, wire, cardboard, recycled materials, fiber, or natural materials, depending on the resources available and the story you want to tell.

Papier-mâché Instructions:

- Crumple newspaper into the basic shape of your sculpture. Secure the pieces with masking tape to create a sturdy base. This is called an armature.
- If needed, add a pointed tip, rounded edges, ripples, bits of organic materials, bubbles, or other raindrop features using rolled newspaper, cardboard, or other recycled materials before applying the papier-mâché.
- Mix 1 cup of flour with 2 cups of water until smooth. Add a little more water if needed to create a thin paste. White glue mixed with an equal amount of water also works well.
- Tear newspaper into strips. Dip each strip lightly into the paste, removing any excess. Cover the armature with overlapping strips, smoothing them as you work. Apply two or three layers to make the sculpture strong.
- Allow the sculpture to dry completely before painting and decorating.

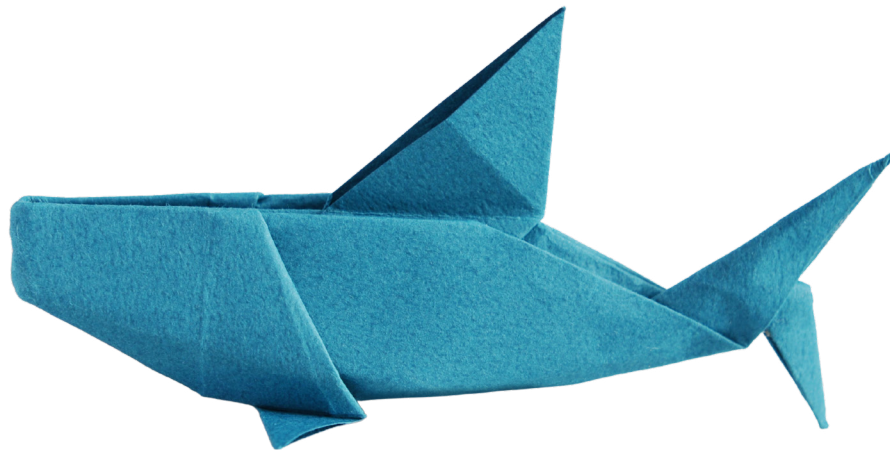
Challenge yourself to include both visible and hidden details that encourage viewers to explore your work from different angles.

6. Reflect

Write a short artist statement.

Explain:

- Why you chose this drop of water.
- What story your artwork tells.
- What you hope people will learn about water after viewing your piece.



Creative Project Idea #2: Literary Arts

Voices from the Water: A Message in a Bottle

Water has traveled through clouds, rivers, lakes, oceans, glaciers, underground aquifers, and even living things for billions of years. If water could tell the ancient story of its travels and leave us a message, what would it say?

Imagine discovering a message in a bottle written by the water that sustains us. Through creative writing, tell its story and help others understand why healthy water matters.

Choose A Format

Write the message you discovered using one of the following formats:

- **A Letter** from the narrator to the people who depend on it
- **A Diary or Journal Entry** describing a day (or thousands of years) in the narrator's life
- **An Urgent Note** that has traveled across time to reach the reader, asking for help to save it
- **A Postcard** sent from one stop on your narrator's journey through the water cycle
- **A Speech or Plea** asking people to care for and protect water
- **A Poem** that gives the narrator a voice and shares its experiences
- **A Conversation** between the narrator and another part of the water cycle (such as a cloud, glacier, river, fish, or person)

Directions

1. Choose Your Voice

Select a narrator whose story you would like to tell.

Your narrator might be:

- A river
- A raindrop
- A lake
- A stream
- The ocean
- A glacier
- A wetland
- A glass of drinking water
- A polluted waterway
- A water-dwelling organism (such as a fish, frog, or aquatic plant)

2. Investigate

Research your narrator using at least two reliable sources (for example: an encyclopedia entry, a National Geographic or NOAA article, a library database, or a source your teacher provides).

Take notes on:

- How the narrator supports life
- How it has changed over time
- What natural events or human activities influence it
- What can people learn from its story

Keep a list of your sources — you may be asked to include them with your final project.

3. Imagine Its Story

Imagine what your narrator would say if it could write a message to the world.

Consider:

- What has it experienced?
- Who depends on it?
- What changes has it witnessed?
- What does it wish people understood?
- If it could ask people to do one thing to protect water, what would it be?

4. Write Your Message

Write your message from the perspective of your chosen narrator.

Your writing might:

- Describe your narrator's habitat and daily life
- Explain why healthy water is important
- Share the challenges it faces
- Encourage readers to help protect rivers, lakes, wetlands, or oceans
- End with a hopeful message about how people can make a positive difference

Ground your writing in at least two or three real facts from your research — your narrator's voice should be imaginative, but its story should be true.

5. Create Your Message in a Bottle

Here are some of the ways you can share your message:

- Carefully roll or fold your finished message and place it inside a clean, recycled bottle.
- Create a digital version of your writing as a document, PDF, webpage, or slideshow.
- Generate a QR code that links directly to your digital message. (Free tools like [qr-code-generator.com](https://www.qr-code-generator.com/) or your Google Drive "share" link work well.)
- Attach the QR code securely to the outside of the bottle so visitors can read your message without opening it.
- Decorate the outside of the bottle with the name of your narrator, illustrations, or other details that reflect its habitat and story.

6. Present Your Story

Display your bottle as part of your class's *"Voices from the Water"* exhibit. Invite classmates to scan the QR codes and discover the message hidden inside each bottle. As they explore the exhibit, encourage them to reflect on what these narrators might teach us about protecting the rivers, lakes, wetlands, and oceans that sustain life on Earth.

Together, your collection of bottles will become a powerful reminder that every waterway has a story — and every one of us can help write a healthier future for our planet.

Creative Project Idea #3: Theater Arts

The Last Drop

Imagine a world where there is only one drop of clean water left.

Who finds it? Who needs it? Who is responsible for protecting it? What choices will people make? Although this story is fictional, it reminds us that clean, healthy water is one of our planet's most precious resources.

You will create a dramatic performance that explores what could happen if only the last drop of clean water remained. Through acting, dialogue, movement, narration, and sound, tell a story that helps your audience understand why protecting water matters and inspires hope for the future.

Directions

1. Imagine the World

Decide what your world is like.

Consider questions such as:

- What happened to the rest of the water?
- Who discovers the last drop?
- Why is it so important?
- What conflict does it create?
- How might people work together to protect water before it is too late?

2. Investigate

Learn about real challenges facing Earth's water resources through books, reliable websites, observations, or conversations with members of your community.

Think about:

- What threatens clean water today?
- How do people, animals, and ecosystems depend on water?
- What actions help protect and restore water resources?
- How can your performance inspire positive change?

3. Plan Your Performance

Write a script, create a storyboard, or develop an outline for your performance.

Think about:

- Who are the main characters?
- What problem do they face?
- How does the story build suspense?
- How is the conflict resolved?
- What message do you want your audience to remember?



4. Create Your Performance

Bring your ideas to life by writing dialogue, choreographing movement, gathering simple props or costumes, and organizing your scenes.

As you create, think about:

- How can dialogue, movement, and facial expressions help tell your story?
- What props, costumes, music, or sound effects will enhance your performance?
- How will you show the importance of water through your characters and actions?
- How can you end your performance with a message of hope or a call to protect clean water?

5. Rehearse

Practice your performance individually or with a group. Refine your dialogue, movement, expressions, and timing so your story clearly communicates its message.

6. Perform

Share your performance with classmates. After the performance, invite your audience to discuss what they learned and identify actions everyone can take to protect clean water.

7. Reflect

After your performance, think about on your experience.

Consider:

- What inspired your story?
- What did you learn about the importance of clean water?
- How did theater help communicate your message?
- What actions can you and your community take to protect water?



3

Share

In this section: You've explored and created - now it's time to share! Use the showcase below to bring your learners' work into the world and celebrate what they discovered about water.

Remember to submit each project at studentsrebuild.org to spark a \$5 donation to organizations protecting the planet.

Extension Activity: Waterways Alive!

Create a *Waterways Alive!* Showcase that celebrates the many ways the water that sustains us supports life. Do not feel limited to only the activities described in this guide.

The exhibition might include:

- Three-dimensional sculptures and models
- Messages in a Bottle writing projects
- Performing arts presentations
- QR codes linking to recorded performances
- Student research about drinking water, conservation, aquatic ecosystems, or local restoration projects

Celebrate and Inspire

Invite families, other classes, or community members to visit your exhibition. Encourage students to explain what they learned about the water that sustains us through their artwork, writing, and performances.

Encourage visitors to explore:

- How does water sustain life?
- How does water connect people, plants, animals, and communities?
- What changes affect water?
- What actions can help protect healthy water?

Conclude the exhibition by inviting each visitor to write or draw one promise they will make to help protect water. Display these commitments on your existing Waves of Change promise wall, creating a lasting reminder that every action can help protect the water that sustains us.

Submit

Once students have completed their projects, don't forget to submit photos or videos showcasing their creative expressions to Students Rebuild at studentsrebuild.org.