

Thinking green

Teen group works to educate public on environment

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Saving the environment is just a dream for crazy tree-huggers, right? No one person could possibly make a real difference with global warming or local pollution, right?

If these thoughts have crossed your mind, you're not alone. But, according to one Anchorage organization, you're wrong.

Meet Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, a club of environmentally minded local teens that is taking huge steps "to educate, inspire, and take action on environmental issues facing our communities," according to group's mission statement.

The club members say they are concerned about the environment and their effect on it, and most of the group's teens are involved in their school's recycling clubs too.

"AYEA has increased my knowledge and awareness of environmental issues as we have seen presentations on electronics recycling and global warming," said Anna Rix, a senior at Chugiak High School and president of Chugiak's Green Effects Club.

"This program has drastically influenced my life by educating (me) so that I can help make a difference in the world in the various (topics) that I am concerned with," said Kevin Saechao, a senior at East.

Alaska Youth for Environmental Action is a part of the National Wildlife Federation. There are seven chapters in communities across Alaska. The Anchorage chapter meets in the NSF building in downtown Anchorage on alternate Tuesdays.

On the list of topics at a recent meeting: Plastics Awareness Week, planning a get-together for recycling programs across the state and an update on work with Anchorage School District Superintendent Carol Comeau and recycling programs in schools.

Members drafted a letter to Comeau, requesting to speak with her about providing an institutionalized recycling program in schools so that recycling club members could spend more time working on community education. They also prepared to appear at an upcoming Assembly meeting to discuss the mayor's recycling plan.

Megan McBride, the communication and trainings coordinator, said that Alaska Youth for Environmental Action members are particularly interested in the plan because it would provide funding for recycling in schools. McBride said that many schools have recycling clubs but that they are underfunded.

"If the Assembly approves the recycling plan, schools across the district will benefit from a coordinated recycling system, and recycling clubs will be able to devote their time to recycling education and other awareness campaigns," she said.

Meeting with city officials is just one way the group raises awareness for the community.

Alaska Youth for Environmental Action is making waves for being such a young organization. In 1998, six teenagers from Kodiak and Anchorage started the group because, according to its Web site, "they wanted an organized, effective outlet for young Alaskans to become involved in the environment."

Alaska Youth for Environmental Action has become just that. The club has been recognized locally and statewide and also received a national award for its work on education about global warming and environmental efforts.

In 2007, Alaska Youth for Environmental Action teens from four regions of Alaska flew to Washington, D.C., to receive the President's Environmental Youth Award for outstanding achievement in environmental protection services.

According to the U.S. Environmental Education Agency, the club's work was jump started when a club member from Dillingham, Verner Wilson, wrote a "Letter to Our Leaders"

during one of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action's summer institutes. The letter described the devastating impacts of global warming on Alaska and requested national action through legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and invest in renewable energy.

Later this same letter served as the basis for a series of environmental awareness programs as well as a petition calling for environmental awareness in the Alaska Legislature. The petition was a huge success -- group members received 5,000 teen signatures from more than 100 communities in Alaska and involved more than 500 Alaska youth in the project in 2006 alone.

Community education and partnership is an important part of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action's mission. The group frequently gives environmental awareness presentations in elementary schools around Alaska and is actively involved with the University of Alaska Anchorage's environmental community outreach programs.

For East senior Saechao, the partnerships are important.

"Without the staff and other outside help in AYEA -- through their knowledge, I would not have known how or what to educate the community (about)," he said.

Club chair Wiley Carson, who is also a member of West High School's Green Team, summarized the value of working together toward environmental awareness.

"When we distribute compact fluorescent bulbs or recycle cans, it is not just about how much carbon that one bulb will save or conserving the one can, it is about starting to act locally -- even in your own home -- and seeing that action spread around the state, the country and even the globe," said Cason.

"Alaska Youth for Environmental Action is the best vehicle for young Alaskans to see and effect that positive sort of change in day-to-day life."

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